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EUGENE O'NEILL

"... he has found the poet in himself at war with the groping thinker."

# OUR CHANGING THEATRE

*by*

R. DANA SKINNER



LINCOLN MAC VEAGH

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DIAL PRESS INC.

NEW YORK · MCMXXXI

LONGMANS, GREEN & CO., TORONTO

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BY THE VAIL-BALLOU PRESS, INC., BINGHAMTON, N. Y.

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED  
TO THE MEMORY OF  
MY MOTHER  
HENRIETTA DANA SKINNER  
AND OF MY FATHER  
HENRY WHIPPLE SKINNER  
EACH OF WHOM IN A DISTINCT WAY  
HELPED IMMEASURABLY TO BRING ABOUT  
MY LOVE OF THE THEATRE



## FOREWORD

EVERY play I have seen, and every actor, has helped in bringing this book to life. I am sure that the radiant enthusiasm for everything theatrical of Mrs. Edith J. R. Isaacs, editor of *Theatre Arts Monthly*, has had its full share, too. But if Michael Williams, editor of *The Commonweal*, had not taken me by the scruff of the neck some eight years ago, and insisted that, in spite of regular business occupations, I should devote evenings to play reviewing, this book would certainly not be in existence today.



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## INTRODUCTION

THE theatre is always astonishing. It is always the world's greatest concentrated effort to create illusion, and through illusion to recapture dreams. It is haunted by the world's vagabonds, fed by the poets, given shelter by the gamblers and knocked about by the gusts of popular fancy. It belongs neither to the temple nor to the marketplace. It is too commercial for one and not practical enough for the other. It falls to pieces if you try to make a pulpit of it, yet you cannot turn it into a business without smashing the very power of illusion it lives by. It dies with the final curtain every night, but comes to life again in less than a day with its magic unimpaired and its glamor more luminous than ever. It borrows from many arts without ever becoming a recognized art in itself. We speak often of the arts of the theatre, but we cannot speak properly of the art of the theatre, unless we are willing to roll into one mysterious entity the playwright, the director, the actors, the scenic designers and the audience, without which the theatre, as theatre, cannot live. Yet, next to the religion of men, there is nothing which keeps so everlastingly young as the theatre. It outlives empires and whole civilizations. It is so much a part of our lives as to be a commonplace, yet it stands as far apart from life as the most fragile dream.

During the last few years, the American theatre has become more than ever a battle-ground—a vivid reflection of the American mind in the making. In one sense, there has never been more devotion put into it. Groups have sprung up in every part of the country dedicated to keeping it alive, and right in New York, at the Civic Repertory Theatre, under the inspiration of Miss Eva Le Gallienne, we have seen the bravest effort ever made to restore the particular glamor which is the theatre's birthright. But we have also seen the rising power of the screen, backed by gigantic banking resources determined to give it the efficiency of a steel mill or of a cigarette sales campaign.

A special form of attack on the theatre has come from the sophisticates, many of whom profess to be the theatre's most devoted friends. What they are doing, without quite realizing it, is to kill the theatre slowly through a sort of mental alcoholism. They are driving it to a frenzy which will end in complete exhaustion. That which is permanent in the theatre, and of its very essence, is its power to give dreams the cast of reality, but not the effort to give reality the cast of a dream. If we take all the ugly things, and the sordid things, all the cheap wit and paltry egotism of sophisticated life, all the adultery and perversion and grossness and spangled evil, and throw it together in what we call the "realistic" theatre, then we are simply doing for the theatre what the drunkard does for himself when he tries to escape the ugliness of life through alcohol. We take situations which would be

tragic if they were duplicated in our own lives and try, through the inherent magic of the theatre, to make them appear romantic, or else trivial and amusing. For a brief spell, this seems to energize the theatre. But in the end, it will bring disillusion and a sense of surfeit and decay.

Fortunately, we have also the only theatre which has shown lasting vitality through the ages—the theatre of the poets. Poets, like the great mystics, are not afraid of reality, nor even of tragic frustration. But they understand the power of dreams in leading men out of themselves and beyond themselves. They do not try to tell people that an ugly reality is beautiful. But they do try to show that beauty may be forged out of ugliness—not by giving a false exterior to ugliness, but by forcing what is ugly to nourish a fresh seed of beauty. Poets understand the creative power of suffering—so much so that instead of trying to forget suffering in a drunken frenzy, they even welcome it. They know that the law of birth springs from the law of suffering, and they are strongly enough rooted in honest realism to accept this towering paradox. Thus you will find the poets of the ages writing, in their tragedies, stories of purgation and cleansing fires, or, in their comedies, stories of difficulties surmounted and dreams realized, not by instantaneous magic, but by meeting squarely the perplexities and absurdities of a very hard and real life. It is this theatre of the poets which, I believe, has suffered the most during the transition period we have just experienced.

As for the motion picture giant, from whose deprivations the theatre is apparently—and only apparently—suffering, it has been quite obvious that Hollywood is making swift progress in perfecting the mechanical technique of the talking picture, and in discovering a few of the possibilities which sound recording opens up. Admitting that the movies offer a totally different form of entertainment from the stage, this does not mean that stage plays cannot successfully be transferred to the screen. Many of them can. But in such plays, the screen will always remain a substitute for the human reality of a stage with living actors, just as phonograph records have remained a substitute for seeing and hearing the concert singer or orchestra. Where the movies enter into an entirely new form of entertainment is in the successful re-creation of large scale historical episodes, and in the telling of stories which depend heavily upon the authenticity and breadth of scenic setting, or upon great flexibility of scenic sequence, as in Western adventure tales. The movies will become increasingly the entertainment medium for telling stories of action, or for transporting audiences across the world or for leading them back through history. They should also, with a little applied imagination, become the medium for re-creating fanciful legend, through the marvels of trick photography. It is quite simple, for example, to picture on the screen all the vagaries of "Alice in Wonderland"—all her astounding growths and contractions, and the dozen favorite incidents which could never be given the proper

illusion on the stage. But all this still leaves to the theatre itself that which is most truly the genius of the theatre—the work of the poets in transcribing complex and sensitive human emotions.

Imagine, if you can, the delicate character shadings of a Chekhov play transposed to the screen, or the beauty of the last act of O'Neill's "Great God Brown," or the tenderness of parts of Susan Glaspell's "Alison's House." Wherever the interest centers on character rather than on story, a play finds its only adequate expression within the four walls of a theatre. But this also happens to be the type of play which expresses most fully the true genius of the theatre. If the movies force the theatre to do only the very things which it can do best, then the movies will have brought about a rebirth of honest drama. The theatre is always astonishing, but never more so than when, guided by poets, it reaches into the soul and draws forth the mystery of human dreams.

When the suggestion was first made to me of glancing back over certain plays given during the last six or seven years, I could see no useful purpose in the idea. Most plays are ships of the night—glittering bravely as they pass, but leaving small mark on the wide ocean of their passage. I argued this point rather stubbornly until it occurred to me that even passing ships sometimes return. They do not perish in a voyage, and one sees them again and again in a port of call, casual and friendly visitors with the distinctly useful purpose of linking men and peoples together. Ships are also eloquent of their times, reflect-

ing the progress of their days in machinery and building, the art of the moment in their fittings, the life of the world in the types and kinds of people they carry hither and thither, and something of the world's adventure in their restlessness and their humble dependence upon the stars and upon waves in the unseen ether. Plays are a bit like that, too, catching moods and impressions of the moment, but forever relating them to the past and the future in mental voyages between yesterday and tomorrow.

Also, the thought slowly grew upon me that one might trace many changes in the real world by re-reading various pages of the play world. It might even be that plays, being occasionally written by poets, carry a vein of prophecy, some hint, perhaps, in the labor of today concerning the things to be born tomorrow. This—and a little more—I have tried to weave into the pages of this book, until its theme has become, for me, at least, a great adventure of the American mind during the last decade, piercing even through the veil of tomorrow.

It would be most ungracious to let a book of this sort go forth on its own adventurous voyage without saying a very special word about the people of the theatre who do the most work in it, who suffer the most from its mistakes, who have its ideals far more at heart than a cynical public is inclined to admit, and who faithfully bring it to life every evening. I mean, of course, the actors. Actors bear the brunt of many things, but of nothing more than this, that what they do can never be delegated to an-

other. They carry the life of a play and the laughter and tears of thousands in their hands, and some of them have the gift of making all else seem a bit more glamorous simply because they have walked the boards of a theatre night after night. I love the theatre twice as much because of the friendship I have enjoyed of some of those who have made it their entire life. .



## CHAPTER I

### THE AMERICAN SCENE

WE are, I firmly believe, on the verge of something quite astounding in American arts and letters, and above all in that union of all the arts which is the theatre. I say this with no fertile evidence at hand to support my belief. Rather, if one were to rest content with surface moods, one might sense a slowing down of the creative pace set in the middle "twenties" when Eugene O'Neill, Sidney Howard, Dan Totheroh, Paul Green, John Howard Lawson, Maxwell Anderson, Laurence Stallings and George Kelly were writing furiously and with all the power and abandon of first ardor. Today the writings of this group are either more infrequent or less charged with the fires of determination. Scenic design, too, has lost something of that splendid urge which set Norman Bel Geddes to work upon his Dante project, which lent sweeping, almost cosmic imagination to the creations of Robert Edmond Jones and brought forth some of the finest conceptions of Lee Simonson, Aline Bernstein, Ernest de Weerth, Donald Oenslager and Jo Mielziner. At that period, the theatre was a throbbing thing.

Of course, the comparative lull we are experiencing today may be distinctly misleading. None of these people

who made the "twenties" memorable is old, either in mind or in body. Some of them are passing through momentary discouragement, others are quietly maturing their work, but all of them could easily burst forth again, and on a higher plane of achievement, once given the general collision of circumstances favorable to creative outpourings. As I see it, just such a collision of forces looms ahead of us. The reasons for thinking so are few, perhaps, but have a certain cogent simplicity.

First of all, there is no parallel in history for what has recently happened to America this side of the thirteenth century Crusades. France, just before that time, was a country of mixed bloods, of rough and brewing energy not unlike the America of 1915. France was, in a certain familiar sense, a "melting pot" of western Europe. The culture emanating from the great monasteries had already exerted a leavening effect and the university of Paris was achieving that eminence which soon drew to it such masterly coördinating minds as that of St. Thomas Aquinas. But when the great Crusades of 1189 to 1229 were waged, all the glory that was to be thirteenth century France was still unsuspected.

Now, the Crusades did a remarkable thing. They took thousands of the best manhood of France and threw them together suddenly in a much older civilization to the East. They took Bergundians and Bretons and men from Normandy and Provence and subjected them all, at the same instant, to the impact of an identical experience. These various and restless young men of France looked

together upon the minarets of Byzantium and felt, probably for the first time in their lives, the meaning of towers aspiring heavenward. The low, rounded Roman arch was almost the only architecture they had known, just as the Roman culture it represented was their only heritage. New forms were merely hinted at—possibly the result of still earlier Crusades. But this older civilization of the East knew that even stone, when reaching toward the skies, could express the aspiring fervor of men. What happened? The Crusaders returned and scattered to their sectional homes. There was no immediate cultural revolution in France. Yet, within fifty years, there arose from the flat plains and river basin of Paris the heaven-searching towers of Notre Dame—not slavish copies of the eastern minarets, but something new and of the sole genius of France. The gothic, merely rumored when these later Crusades set out, was now a commanding and permanent reality. Before long similar towers, catching in stone the faith of a reborn people, were rising from every corner of France. And with these towers rose the culture, the philosophy, the arts and the letters in a beautiful synthesis such as the world had never seen since Athens, itself inspired by an eastern contact with Asia minor, had bred the age of Pericles.

The whole history of western civilization has been the flow westward of eastern inspiration, absorbed and transformed in the course of its slow movement until it has become something freshly beautiful in its own right. First Athens, then Rome from Athens, then France again rooting its new life in the Orient; a steady and astounding

progress, re-animated from time to time by a return to the original source. St. Thomas Aquinas at the Paris University not only gathered together all the scientific data of his day and all the fragments of Greek philosophy preserved by the labors of the monasteries through the "dark" ages, but also sought the wisdom of the Arabs and welcomed much that the Moors had brought through Spain. Just as Christianity itself combined the spiritual genius of the east and the transforming power of the west, so the thirteenth century professors and artists brought into a superb system the arts and letters of the whole Mediterranean world and gave it the preëminence of the gothic tower.

It is by no means too much to suppose that the rough energies of the American scene today, with its mixed bloods and sectional prejudices, may achieve a not incomparable result from that migration to the east which was the great war. A million or more Americans received the simultaneous impact of an older civilization, and received it in a mood of rare exaltation and idealism. No matter that the idealism was soon shattered. The impression, when it was first made, was received in a mood not duplicated in many generations, a mood that actually hoped for and felt to be possible a new kind of bond between nations.

It may be forty years before we can hope to see the American equivalent of the gothic age in France. We must not be impatient if it takes us, too, some fifty years in all to erect our Notre Dame. But deep within our rude

selves, a mark has been set, and it is a mark received from an older civilization to the east. It ended our days of fusing mixed bloods. We ceased from that day to be a nation of immigrants and became a nation ready to absorb and transform the impulse given to us from an older world.

It is from rooted things as broad and strong and irresistible as these that I look for a rebirth of creative effort in American arts and letters. Surface indications, only, point the other way. The impulse so fervently voiced by the artists and writers of the "twenties" will prove to be, I feel sure, a mere forerunner of the achievements soon to come. The fatuous prosperity, which threatened to dull, and in many cases did dull the creative mood at the close of the last decade, has met its own master in the trials and tragedies of world business depression. Orgies of prosperity have never lasted too long and never will. The intermediate years between inflation (mental as well as financial) and harassed depression will give again all that fine balance achieved in the middle twenties. There are terrors in world sickness which paralyse the creative will, and stinking vapors in strident prosperity which anæsthetize it. But we are now entering another middle period, chastened, but with fear behind us. In such a scene, the thing that happened to us during the world war, like the thing that happened to France from 1200 on, will create a cultural heritage far richer than anything we had dared to hope we might pass on to our children.

Something of all this, as I have hinted, is to be found

in the plays of recent years. I do not know whether the same playwrights and the same scenic artists and the same directors will have a strong hand in writing the next chapter of our own thirteenth century. But whether they do or do not, at least their work will live as something more than a passing mood. Poets, as we know, have intuitions amounting to prophecy and much that has graced our stage in these transition years has had the true range of poetic insight. We may have another and a much finer Eugene O'Neill, but whatever the theatre of tomorrow becomes, something of O'Neill will be in its fibre. There will be something of Dan Totheroh, too, meagre as the number of his contributions has been so far, and something also of the Philip Barry who wrote "John" and of the Stallings and Anderson who wrote "What Price Glory" and of the Lynn Riggs who wrote "Green Grow the Lilacs" and of the Paul Green who wrote "In Abraham's Bosom." There will certainly be something of the Susan Glaspell who wrote "Alison's House." There will be at least as much of those courageous producing groups who fostered the best writings of our theatrical poets—of the earlier Theatre Guild, of Eva Le Gallienne and her Civic Repertory associates, of Kenneth Macgowan and Robert Edmund Jones and the other Provincetown pioneers and of numberless shortlived groups whose energy and zeal had to make up for tragically small material resources.

The theatre of tomorrow, like the American mind of tomorrow, will be understandable largely in terms of the

changing theatre of the last ten years. Many of the plays produced between 1920 and 1930 will mean to the theatre of the 1930's what Ibsen and Shaw have meant to us in the last decade. I realize that many of the plays mentioned in this book will never be produced again, yet nearly every one has either contributed directly to the coming theatrical rebirth or has, through its faults and its failures, given us lessons of true importance for the work ahead of us. The American scene today is one of beguiling interest and already carries within it a certain unborn dignity and greatness.

## CHAPTER II

### THE THEATRE AND THE GREAT PUBLIC

THE whole heart and purpose of this book might as well be admitted at this point. I can not, if I would, make a secret of the fact that I am stagestruck—in spite of the cynical chill which is supposed to descend upon all professional critics. What I want to do, if words can do it, is to impart some of my own love of the theatre to others, some of that absorbing interest, over and above the entertainment furnished by a particular play, which makes even a poor play enduring and heightens immeasurably the thrill of a truly great production. That kind of interest comes only with understanding more and more of the hidden qualities of plays and acting, with an eager curiosity which, while cherishing the full enthusiasm of the amateur spirit, catches as well a flash of professional ardor, and of some of the fires of national life and thought beyond theatre walls. In other words, love of the theatre grows as one's own art of playgoing grows, and as one learns to feel in the make-believe of the theatre the quickening of new forces converging on life itself.

In the chapters of this book, I shall try to recall, as sharply and clearly as possible, the conspicuous points of many plays that mark the recent transition through ultra-



DAN TOTHEROH

. . . has caught as perhaps no other American poet the song  
in lyric tragedy.



realism back to the old magic of the theatre of make-believe. Many of these plays are still being acted, by road companies, by stock companies or by little theatre amateur groups. Others have become classics of repertory. In every case, these plays illustrate, to some extent, the finer points of the theatre which enliven and enrich one's hours of playgoing. They also catch, I believe, many of the changes in American mentality, ideals and emotions. The full art of the theatre is not confined to those on the stage. It spreads—it must spread, if the theatre is to be truly alive—to the audience. Then the witching circle is complete and poets can have their way with us.

If audiences did not make up at least one half of the living theatre, the task of the playwrights might be easier, but it would certainly be less enthralling. A book can be written as if for an individual. A play always drives at the emotions of a group. It is like the words of a public speech compared to a written essay. What is this public, then, which has helped to create the American theatre? What does it demand as its share in everlasting make-believe?

The theatrical world, I am persuaded, is suffering (to use the modern jargon) from a "myth complex." From decade to decade, nine out of ten managers will tell you that, for the time being, there is some particular type of play "that the public wants." This is the most indefensible myth ever invented, but exhibits the longevity of an elephant. Playwrights of original power suffer from it the most. They can tell you countless sad tales of manuscripts

submitted and returned with the comment that "this play is too good for the general public—the public wants only pep and action." Eventually these manuscripts wander into the office of some struggling theatrical group with a few ideals left—and find a home there, also an intelligent if meagre production, and not infrequently commercial success. The one thing which the curious public seems not to want is sameness of type. Almost invariably, it has been the tenth manager, possessed of courage and imagination, who has scored commercial gain by producing a play as unlike as possible anything that has appeared that season.

I recall, for example, a series of sharply contrasting successful plays which happened to appear in relatively close succession. Some of them are still remembered and acted. The notable fact is that it is almost impossible to find among them a single point of unity in material or theme. Let me mention them briefly, to illustrate my point.

"The Dybbuk," by Ansky, was tragic and darkly mystical; "Craig's Wife," by George Kelly, was modern, photographic and unhappy; "Cradle Song," still popular, is tender, delicately maternal and almost without plot; "Broadway" was old-fashioned melodrama in modern clothes; "Burlesque" was sentimental comedy; "The Trial of Mary Dugan" was a mystery play almost empty of physical action; "The Shanghai Gesture" was a commonplace tragedy of misguided revenge set in bawdy surroundings; "Dracula" was deliberately sadistic; "Strange

Interlude" defied every canon of supposed public taste in length, in form and in "high-brow" implications, yet always played to jammed houses; "Coquette" was a particularly unhappy and sentimental tragedy; "The Ivory Door," a favorite for amateur revivals, is pure costume fantasy; "The Command to Love" was intrigue, dirt, and cheap wit in polished surroundings; Philip Barry's "Paris Bound" was one of the most talky plays of its season in New York; "Porgy" was negro folk drama; "The Royal Family" was a sort of Trelawny up-to-date. And so goes the list, taken purely at random, and including but one of the Theatre Guild successes—most of which would have been rejected by Broadway managers as "not just what the public wants."

What, if any, then, is the explanation of the extraordinary notion that this curious public has definite wants, when the box-office vote of this same public indicates the widest possible catholicity of taste? It lies, I think, first of all in the fact that there is definitely one thing upon which the public always insists; and secondly in the search of managers to find that one thing without in the least knowing where to look. The one real public demand can be summed up in the word "illusion." The joint task of playwrights, actors and directors is to produce for the space of two hours a complete sense of illusion, a sort of self-hypnotism on the part of the audience that makes even the most fantastic stage happenings seem, for the moment, to be real. Whether this illusion is of tragedy, of comedy or of farce, of the present day

or of the remote past, of polite or of disreputable life, of grandeur or of squalor, matters not the least. If the illusion is unbroken by patches of poor playwriting, by poor acting, or by clumsy and uneven direction that fails to establish a pervading mood, then nine times out of ten the public will yield approval. The theatre is a world of make-believe, obviously; but we can not be made to believe for long if something happens every five minutes to break the illusion. When the play loses its illusion for us, it is like the conjurer who does his trick so clumsily that we see how it is done. One might almost say that the subject matter is nothing; and that the integrity of illusion is everything!

Subject matter and theme are, however, closely connected with illusion. If, for example, the material is well handled, people will accept the utterly fanciful as real. They will "believe in" Peter Pan or in a Chanticleer or in a Dracula. Underneath the toughest and most sophisticated skin lies a day-dreaming child, ready and eager to create a miraculous world peopled by strange creatures. But when a playwright becomes realistic and serious, the very theme he chooses may not lend itself to the successful creation of illusion. His perspective may be too narrow or too prejudiced, too morose or too bitter, too cynical or too sophisticated to win instinctive public response. What he tells in his play may be true, but he may tell only half of the truth. He may draw a terrorizing picture of disintegration without admitting that na-

ture herself shows amazing powers of reintegration and of healing. An unbalanced theme can, and frequently does destroy illusion as effectively as poor technical construction or poor acting. The matter can be summed up in the homely comment we hear so often—"I just don't believe things can be as bad as this play makes out."

It is in this very question of the nature and kind of illusion created—or at least attempted—that we can find, I think, a sort of pattern of the modern changing theatre. It is not enough to speak of plays as comedies or tragedies or dramas. Those words, while convenient enough in the classroom, convey little or nothing of the true inwardness and vitality of plays. There are tragedies that leave you exalted and comedies that leave you wondering if any of the tenderer things of life remain. There are "happy endings" that violate every deep experience of human affairs and "sad endings" as thrillingly charged with beauty as sunsets.

In certain fine tragedies, one discovers a lyric or singing quality which is of the very life of poetry, and yet has little or nothing to do with mere poetic expression. Eugene O'Neill wrote at least one such tragedy in the "Great God Brown." Dan Totheroh achieved the same quality in "Wild Birds," and John Howard Lawson in "Processional." The closing lines of Elmer Rice's "Street Scene" also caught the lyric note—utterly different from Thomas Gray's "moody madness, laughing wild amid severest woe" which finds reflection in bitter or cynical

tragedy, and also different from the senile decay which O'Neill mistook for ultimate peace in the last act of "Strange Interlude."

The dull despair induced by inability to adjust to the speed and power of a mechanized civilization has brought a visible oversupply in recent years of what we might call the "shut-in" tragedies—those which embrace only half of the mysterious vital and spiritual forces at work. Some of these have been near enough to photographic realism to maintain illusion and capture a public following. But they seem to have fire without light—in the sense that a log rotting in the forest is chemically "on fire" without emitting a cleansing flame. A man once explained to me his idea of Hell fire by this analogy—disintegration, the breaking up of the cohesive forces, the leaving of dry rot instead of the clean ashes left by flame, from which the Phoenix can arise. There is more than poetic truth to the idea. The "shut-in" tragedies, with which our stage has been deluged, leave the audience with only the clammy chill of a handful of dry rot. They give forth none of the purging flame of lyric tragedy.

In current dramas, we have the same contrast—plays of frustration and harsh bitterness balanced by plays of spiritual emergence. The same author will be found writing plays of both types, reflecting in amazing measure the moody currents of present-day life, undirected and uncontrolled by standards of sanity. Sidney Howard, for example, has given us the finely emerging climax of

"They Knew What They Wanted" and also the utter collapse of "The Silver Cord." Philip Barry has given us both the delightful onrush of "Holiday" and the futile frustrations of "In a Garden." He has also given us the sordid implications and spiritual deadlock of "Tomorrow and Tomorrow."

Melodramas and particularly mystery plays fall, of course, into a group quite apart, in the sense that theme is usually subordinated to plot and action. Occasionally, as in Mr. Weitzenkorn's "Five Star Final," or in "What Price Glory," the melodramatic form merely cloaks the hot fury of a man with a message. Many plays emerging from Soviet Russia, such as "Roar China," are imbued with this same spirit of propaganda. By and large, however, melodrama is a thing of plot rather than theme, with illusion maintained by sheer excellence of technical construction.

The lighter comedies run the gamut from farce and satire to plays such as "Holiday" with an appreciably serious or tender undertone. In all except the farces, the choice of theme determines very largely the success of the illusion. As I shall refer quite often to "theme" in commenting on individual plays, and on what they reveal of the American mind, perhaps this is a convenient moment to explain my own understanding of this perplexing word.

The theme of a play—as distinct from its plot and from the incidental material and environment—is the very simple question to which the action of the play furnishes

an answer. Sometimes it is astonishingly difficult to get people to tell you clearly what a play is about. Usually, they will start to tell you the story in detail, showing that they confuse theme with plot. In the case of any well written play, it ought to be possible to describe the theme in the form of one question and one answer. Hamlet, for instance, answers this question: "What would a sensitive young man do if told by an apparition that his uncle had helped to murder his father in order to marry his mother?" The fact that Hamlet is a prince, and a Danish prince, is part of the plot material—as also his love for Ophelia, his use of the playlet "to catch the conscience of the king," his accidental killing of Polonius and his subsequent banishment. All this concerns merely Shakespeare's elaborate plot for answering the general theme question. The same theme—put in question form—might serve for a play about modern gangsters or for an African tribal play, and a dozen different playwrights might find a dozen different answers to the main question.

The theme question of Philip Barry's "Holiday" is equally simple. It is: "If a young man has made enough money to take a year off while he is still young, and if his fiancée wants him instead to stick by the grindstone, what should he do?" Barry answers, "break his engagement, if the girl refuses to see the light." It is part of the plot, and not of the theme, that the young man's fiancée has an attractive sister who really understands him. Horatio Alger would probably have answered the same theme

question by having his hero resolve to keep hard at work and "mount the ladder" from bond salesman to bank president.

The importance of a theme to successful illusion thus has two aspects. First, does the theme question itself touch a universally interesting problem? Second, does the particular playwright's answer ring true to human experience and to the very natural desire to see the main character, with whom we are supposed to sympathize, do what we ourselves hope we might do under similar test? Here is where a play, through its theme, establishes its closest bond with the national mind of the moment, with the temper of defeat or of victory.

I have made this slight digression not only to clear up later references to themes that have made or un-made many important plays, but also to clarify a bit my arrangement of comments on these plays. The theme question and the playwright's answer have largely determined the rough groupings I have made of important plays of the present transition period. For convenience, I have grouped plays according to American or foreign authorship. But, under each group, I have also thrown together the lyric tragedies as distinct from the "shut-in" tragedies, the plays of frustration in contrast to the plays of "emergence," and the comedies of reasonably important theme as in quite a different group from mere farces or from plays of deliberate satire.

In making these groupings, I was rather startled to discover how many of the successful plays of this period

in our theatre were serious even to the point of tragedy. Audiences have voted quite as emphatically for sturdy drama as for the things of gossamer and of rainbow tints. But I have been even more startled to find how continuously it has proved true that "what the public wants" is not a special type of play and not even a special viewpoint in playwriting, but rather and always that integrity of illusion from which the restful glamor of the theatre springs.

## CHAPTER III

### THE SONG IN TRAGEDY

FEW things have heralded with more certainty the approach of a great era in American drama than the rich expression of the tragic spirit during the last decade, above all the spirit of lyric tragedy. It is in the tragic song that we find the maturing instinct of a race, a recognition of the creative and liberating force of suffering and a sense of the spiritual resurrection which emerges from it. The morbidity of the tragedy without song is little more than the scant vision of adolescence which has never known the last great cycle of emergence, that inner conquest which has fashioned the souls of heroes since legend and folk-lore began.

We have had both kinds of tragedy from American playwrights, and often both kinds from the same author. In his early days—and again in his later days—Eugene O'Neill has given us many tragedies of frustration or of incompleteness, responding largely, I imagine, to the great spiritual upheavals and subsidences in his own curiously unadjusted mind. But in one play, at least, he made a discovery which, if he can ever recapture the vision of it, will assure his ultimate liberation as a true poet of tragedy. This discovery was in "The Great God Brown."

*The Great God Brown*

Three things emerged clearly from this play. In his use of realistic masks—as distinct from the representative masks of old Greek tragedy—O'Neill plunged into a new and fascinating mode of extending the scope of emotion and spiritual contrast on the stage. But his courage and vision in this respect were not yet matched by ability to use the new medium. It engaged him in a task that frequently proved too difficult for his technical resources. Lastly, and most important of all, O'Neill gave unmistakable signs of emerging, himself, from the sensual cloud in which he had been groping for many years. This play has high moments of spiritual insight, of abiding faith, and of understanding of the mystic vale of tears.

We all know the meaning of masks—from the impassive “poker face” of the card player to the defensive attitude or pose assumed by many sensitive souls as an armor against the cruel and misunderstanding eyes of neighbors. How often your apparently cynical or conceited man hides in the recesses of his nature a tortured, uncertain self—a truth which he reveals only to those whom he knows, intuitively, to be rich with understanding. These are commonplaces of experience. But O'Neill put them on the stage. His characters wear masks when talking to certain people—discard them when talking with others. As their speech and attitudes change, their faces change as well. It is a method of heightening, more completely than the facial muscles of actors can achieve, the range

of emotions through which his characters charge and recoil.

This interesting method, as the first two acts of the play establish, would bring no insuperable difficulties if the author were content to rest in the realm of objective drama. But "The Great God Brown" is far more than a play of many separate characters. It borders on the realm of the old morality play, in which characters represent aspects of the soul—as Everyman talking with his own approaching Death, or with his Good Deeds. William Brown, the mask of popular success, and Dion Anthony, the poet and artist, become (whatever the conscious intentions of O'Neill may have been) conflicting aspects of one man. When Anthony dies, Brown assumes his mask, and the world, including Anthony's wife, does not know that Anthony is dead.

This idea is not hard to understand. In spite of the bewilderment it often causes, I can not see why it is any more obscure than its counterpart in the folk-lore of nearly every country and time. In the old Norse legends, Siegfried, wearing the magic cap, assumes the form of Guenther in order to subdue Brunhilde and win her as Guenther's bride. Unfortunately, O'Neill allows himself to complicate the action of the play—the entrances and exits—to such an extent, that the exchange of masks becomes a technical distraction for the audience, no matter how clear its intention and meaning may remain. If you want your poetic vision to reach beyond a very limited group, it is wise not to ask too much of a mixed audience.

O'Neill created in this play what I think is an unnecessary clash between reality and fantasy. Realism frequently obscures the authentic flow of imagery and inward fire.

The greatest achievement of the play, however, lies in the discovery which O'Neill then made—or partly made—and which most of the contemporary critics ignored. He began to fathom the meaning of earthly suffering. Probably no poet of the theatre in recent times has always been more intensely aware of suffering than O'Neill. It has been his veritable obsession. Evil and its resulting catastrophe have formed the central theme of most of his plays—evil in manifold forms, as pride, as sensuality, as cowardice, as avarice. But until he wrote *Brown*, he had never seen beyond catastrophe to a possible resurrection. Like Ibsen, he had always dived into a swamp, and his head had stuck there. He reached the lowest muds in "*Desire Under the Elms*." But *Brown* marked an astonishing change. He tells us in this play that from the tears of earth is born the eternal laughter of Heaven—that resurrection lies beyond death—that man should keep himself forever as a pilgrim on this earth—(using Thomas á Kempis as his text)—and that God is!

There is still confusion apparent in his thought, for O'Neill feels more acutely than he thinks. But for once, at least, he came definitely forth from the great shadow which fell forbiddingly over his earlier work. He approached that ecstatic moment when tragedy transmutes itself, through song, into spiritual comedy. After writing this play, he might, if he had willed, have attained pro-

portions of beauty and dramatic truth to which Ibsen turned unseeing eyes.

In all, *Brown* remains a most notable play—not for the occasionally perverse and confused dregs of an older O'Neill it contains—but for its latent promise and momentary attainment of a lofty vision.

Of course the qualities O'Neill showed in "*Great God Brown*" had long been struggling to the surface. Even in his first full-length play, "*Beyond the Horizon*," he came very close to a similar understanding, close enough to set off this play from his more morose works, even if it fails to achieve real song.

To many people, I imagine, the most interesting point of "*Beyond the Horizon*" will always be the sharp parallel, in the initial situation, with "*The Great God Brown*." *Brown* is but the completion, the carrying on to a higher and lyrically tragic point of the material contained in the earlier play. The two plays belong together in any study of the growth of O'Neill as a tragic poet.

### *Wild Birds*

Of all the American playwrights, none, I imagine, is more richly conscious of the song in fine tragedy than Dan Totheroh. There are perhaps only a few playgoers who now recall in detail his "*Wild Birds*"—the tender tragedy of two orphans on a ranch in the far western plains. But many recall the name of the play and the singular way in which, after early severe criticisms, it grew upon the theatrical consciousness of New York and

was eventually included in at least one standard collection of the "ten best plays" of its season. It ended—unfortunately, I think,—in a suicide. Such endings often reflect a momentary psychological knot in the author's own mind, an unwillingness to go through to the end with the problem he has created. Yet, in spite of this, Totheroh managed somehow, through the poetic leap of his last lines, to make one feel that life and death were only his terms of imagery for the spiritual transition from bondage to freedom. In the red terror of that last dawn over the prairies, one felt the soul of the young girl racing to greet the rising sun.

I feel that Totheroh is not only one of our truest poets of the theatre, but that in a period of creative activity, such as we have ahead of us, he will forge out something with an overwhelming impact of beauty. He is better known today on the California coast than in New York, and best known in the theatre as a writer of short plays, many of which are constantly being produced by little theatre groups. Unlike O'Neill, I feel that his real powers will mature in later life—when, so to speak, he can find the courage to have his unhappy wild birds live through to their own freedom.

### *Processional*

Among all the younger dramatists, few gave promise equal to John Howard Lawson at the time he wrote "Processional." This is one of those plays for whose production we owe a real debt to the Theatre Guild of New

York. It may never be revived, but in days to come there will be other plays which, consciously or unconsciously, will stem from this rowdy and amazing song of American life just after the world war.

This play was presented by the Theatre Guild frankly as an experiment. This much is certain; in its outward aspects, no one had ever seen a play like it before. But underneath the surface, in what it told of the soul and the mind, in its almost unconscious symbolism, it was not new but rather as old as the legends of peoples. It told of the struggle of man to free himself from materialism, to attain something higher than the general level of his surroundings, and of the discovery that this attainment comes only through suffering and torture. That final attainment was not included in the play, but only the rumor of it—something creative and fine emerging from the syncopated chaos of post-war American life.

To understand the play, even in present perspective, demands some patience and good will, for it is essentially an allegory told in the language, in the mannerisms and in the surroundings of its own day. In a West Virginia coal mining town at the time of a strike, Dynamite Jim, the son of a mountaineer woman, breaks from prison, murders a soldier who tries to block his escape, flees to his mother's cabin in the hills, and at last, when surrounded by troops, in his effort to break through the lines, takes for himself Sadie, the daughter of a Jewish shop-keeper. He is hunted down by the soldiers and the Ku Klux Klan, hanged, and his eyes put out. But his body

is cut down in time to save his life and five months later he returns to find his mother and the girl who is carrying his child. The Klan has tried to run them both out of town, but Jim finds Sadie in time to marry her, and, though his eyes no longer see, to hear the bells in her voice—the song of motherhood that has transformed her from a little sensualist into a woman, fired with the passion “to raise her kid.”

This is the bare story. In its telling, Mr. Lawson surrounded it with the bald, trashy circumstances of American life. He called the play a symphony in jazz—because, in its treatment, he jumbled together all the weird and incongruous elements of American life and thought, elements of burlesque, extravaganza, tragedy, comedy, irony and biting hate, all to the perpetual accompaniment, sometimes on-stage, frequently off, of resounding jazz music. Like the excruciating blare of a trumpet rising stridently above a rolling melody, the most absurd and grotesque lines, actions and situations obtrude themselves into moments of tragic power. Everywhere the jazz tempo, which, after all, symbolized so aptly the confusion of our lives following the close of the war—no thought continued long enough to gather strength, no beauty permitted to shine without hoarse laughter, no emotion allowed to enlarge without being jabbed by absurdity—as if everywhere a circus parade were to meet a funeral and each convey something of its own spirit to the other. This is no symphony, no agreeable blending of sounds or of ideas, but a cacophony, a throwing together of discords

from which—if we follow the allegory closely—something creative, perhaps symphonic, may emerge later.

For the allegory is the thing to cleave to if you want to see the beauty hidden in the circus tent. What is it, after all, but crime, punishment and redemption? When Jim has murdered the soldier, he cries out to the spirit of his mother—"I have done a black thing!" Black indeed, and more black things are added, more murders and the taking of Sadie Cohen, herself a pleasure-loving, jazz-tuned girl of the town. Black deeds on his soul, in which most of the discordant life forces around him are partners. And for this comes the black punishment of blindness. As his soul, so shall his body become, until, from within, he learns to summon a different light that makes him a man of towering strength. And of Sadie the same thing. The jazz in her veins has blinded her as well. Her whole world rises up to mock and deride her—some to scourge her from town, others to advise her against fulfilling motherhood. But against this tide rises her small voice, like a pilgrim in the night—"I want to raise my kid!" And in the blind humility of Jim and the dawning womanhood of Sadie, united at last and alone, even though the strains of jazz still sound faintly in their ears, you have, I believe, as fine a promise of redemption as a playwright dealing only with natural forces can give. What is more, if you broaden the allegory to include the things actually going on beneath the surface of American life at that time, and even today, you can see that it holds true of the nation at large—lost in a mad

pleasure hunt, blackened with murders and crime without precedent, carrying into everything the blatant rhythm of jazz, and yet, in spite of all, showing a faint creative promise, born from the very suffering we are trying to escape, a voice sounding from the depths, still very feeble, yet gaining in volume and sweetness and courage.

One might easily gather the impression that Lawson was straining after unusual and startling effects, that much of the pandemonium was purely an effort to achieve the bizarre. It is quite evident that many of the critics who wrote of "Processional" at the time held this view. One, in particular, complained that it lacked simplicity. But is there such a thing as simplicity in chaos itself? The play had a very real simplicity in the main allegory. Only the outward circumstances were chaotic. After all, if one once accepts the idea that jazz music is only one symptom of a general national and even world-wide disease, all the rest falls into line spontaneously. If Mr. Lawson had been straining deliberately at effect, he could hardly have achieved this sense of spontaneous effusion. The work was too crude and uneven to bear the marks of studied effort. It was a torrent, not an artificial canal of human emotions. I can understand that many who saw "Processional" did not enjoy it. It had many moments of objectionable realism, but respect is due the good and fine things that were in it. If, some day, Mr. Lawson learns the secret that restraint heightens rather than weakens dramatic force, he will be by that much a truer artist.

In "Processional," he often marred his fine purpose by crudity mistaken for force. But, above all else, he wrote this tragedy in full lyric rhythm and elevation. Since then, he has given us nothing comparable. Will he, too, be one of those to emerge in the coming decade with the full strength of that "rumor" which so lyrically charged the last lines of "Processional"?

### *Street Scene*

Less in point of time of production than in animating spirit, Elmer Rice's "Street Scene" is more comparable to "Processional" than any other contemporary tragedy. In the technical sense it is no tragedy at all, yet, in such matters I feel we must accept the overwhelming spirit of a play rather than technical classroom formulae. The implications of "Street Scene" are all boldly tragic and in the lyric key.

Unquestionably "Street Scene" is a play of extraordinary sweep, power and intensity, which catches up with amazing simplicity and sincere feeling the ragged, glowing, humorous and tragic life that pours in and out of one of those brown-stone apartment houses hovering on the upper edge of the slum district of New York. It has its brutal moments and its coarse ones. But they are never brutal nor coarse from the sophisticated viewpoint so many authors assume today, and behind every incident and every character you feel the pity and the understanding of a playwright who has glimpsed a great truth—that no matter what may be the pressure of one's en-

vironment, the only true power to meet the life of today must come from within the individual.

The gripping illusion of "Street Scene" is one of the few that honestly challenges verbal description. You can never convey through words alone what the theatre, at its best, conveys by sound, color, motion and a subtly sustained mood. Nevertheless, a brief outline of what one sees and feels is necessary to an understanding of Mr. Rice's real achievement. As the curtain rises, we see the front of an old-fashioned brown-stone apartment house set in the lamplit gloom of a hot summer evening. Abraham Kaplan is sitting in his shirt sleeves by the open window of the ground-floor apartment. The German wife of an Italian music teacher is trying to catch a breath of air from the opposite window. People are passing and repassing, bedraggled, heat-tortured persons. A boy comes along the sidewalk on roller skates and calls to his mother for an extra dime for ice cream cones. The neighbors discuss the weather and the heat. Slowly you begin to learn who the various people are that inhabit this grim building—the burned-out, slatternly widow, the Jewish radical, the Italian musician, the burly stage hand and his wife and children on the second floor, the woman on the third floor about to have her first baby. And so it goes, in a slowly weaving pattern, intensely human, never overdrawn and never failing, in depicting a type, to add to that type a touch of individual characterization. As the various inhabitants of the house seek air on the street you begin to sense the possibility of

drama in their lives. Mrs. Maurrant, the stage hand's wife on the second floor, has become pretty well exhausted in the struggle to get a kind word from her burly husband. Her son, Willy (the boy on roller skates), is getting definitely out of hand. Her daughter, Rose, a clerk in a real estate office, threatens to become involved with a married man who wants to put her on the stage. The neighbors have seen Mrs. Maurrant talking rather too often to the bill collector from the milk company. Is she playing with fire? Frank Maurrant is growing suspicious—his wife is growing reckless. But when the Buchanan baby arrives on the third floor, it is Mrs. Maurrant who spends the night with the mother and takes charge of the situation. Another family in the building is about to be dispossessed. Life is becoming very real and complex in this gathering place of humanity. The Italian music teacher is proud of Columbus. The Scandinavian janitor languidly insists that Lief Ericson discovered America. Rose Maurrant comes home late after dining and dancing with her office manager. Her father drives her to bed.

The next morning Frank Maurrant is going to Hartford for the try-out performance of a play. The bill collector drops by. The children go to school. Abraham Kaplan goes off to write his everlasting articles on the economic revolution. His daughter departs to teach school. His son, Samuel, begs Rose Maurrant to marry him and "go off somewhere and get out of it all." Rose leaves to attend the funeral of her boss. Mrs. Maurrant lets the

bill collector come to her apartment. Frank Maurrant, much the worse for drink, comes back. The brown-stone beehive suddenly comes to life. Frank Maurrant rushes upstairs, shots are fired, a moment later the body of the milk collector crashes through the pane of the second-floor window. He is calling for help. He is dragged back into the room. Police. Ambulance. Crowds. Frank Maurrant escapes. Tragedy in the midst of the commonplace. And, as one of the women remarks, "It all goes to show that you never know when you get up in the morning what the day holds." Rose Maurrant comes back in time to see the dying form of her mother being carried to the ambulance. And during all this, the sheriff and his men proceed with the business of dispossessing the Hildebrand family and dumping their furniture on the sidewalk. Life goes on.

There is a third act, the same afternoon. But you can hardly call it an act when it is merely the continuing, surging drama of frightened, awestruck people who somehow keep right on about their ways in the very shadow of death. Frank Maurrant is finally captured. He has a last word with his daughter. He must have been "clean out of his head," he tells her. He is not sorry for himself, but the pleading eyes of his dead wife hover before him. In various ways the neighbors help Rose Maurrant. Tragedy has matured her suddenly. Even her office manager becomes a sincere friend for the moment, seeking nothing but the chance to help. Young Sam Kaplan tells her again of his love. He wants her to belong to him so

that he can protect her. But she feels somehow that everything that has happened is due to the fact that every one has tried too hard to "belong" to some one else. The world can't be met by trying to attach yourself to outside things. You must find your strength and peace first from within. Perhaps some day, a little later, she and Sam—? But there you are. Rose goes off. A couple come in search of a vacant apartment. Life in the brown-stone will go on being what it has always been!

It is perhaps hard to believe that from incidents as varied and scattered as these, Mr. Rice could have created an enthrallingly vivid sense of reality, sensitiveness, cowardice, despair and courage. But he succeeded in an overflowing measure. "Street Scene" is, if you like to label things, an intensely realistic play. No detail is omitted which might lend photographic realism—even to the loose rubber heel of the Scandinavian janitor. Yet I think that any one who sat through this play realized that Mr. Rice had only used realism as a means to an end. He was telling the universal story of a city. The same kind of things, differing only in degree, might happen (from the newspapers we know they do happen) in the wealthiest or in the lowliest quarters of the city. Behind a marble front, they would happen with a less merciless exposure. That is the only difference. When all is said and done, Mr. Rice's highest achievement was in painting this vivid panorama without creating a sense of despair. Human beings are to be pitied for what they bring on themselves, but they are not mere automatons crushed under

the giant footsteps of environment. Once more we come back to that brief illuminated moment when Rose Maurrant says that the force to meet life must come from within. Suffering—yes. Despair—no. Life is pretty much what we make it and the fault lies in ourselves if we make a poor job of it. In spite of the brutal frankness of a few scenes, the undertone of this play is honest and true. It comes vastly nearer being “a great American play” than O’Neill’s much vaunted “Strange Interlude,” or in fact than any of those plays of recent years which have sought to explain life from the mud flats of pessimism.

It is possible that Elmer Rice had only one play within him of the scope, power and implied inner beauty of “Street Scene.” But the poetic insight of the last act, with its keen understanding of what the individual can do to conquer outward circumstance, points to Rice as one of the few dramatists capable of giving back to American city life its own full measure of accusation and its gleam of hope. He can do for this phase of our life what Toth-eroh and Lynn Riggs can do for America of the soil.

### *Paul Green’s Short Plays*

At least two American playwrights have come forth to sing the tragedy of the Negro. One of them, Paul Green, first came into national prominence through the printed versions of his plays, published while he was an instructor in philosophy in one of our southern universities—North Carolina. Later, his full-length play, “In Abraham’s Bosom,” was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Dubose Hey-

ward is the second playwright to use the stage in behalf of the tragedy of America's third race.

The earlier short plays of Paul Green centered for the most part in territory and about types of Negro men and women whom he knew from close local observation. Six of these plays, many of which have been acted by little theatre groups, were originally published in a single volume under the collective title of "Lonesome Road." They all concern the Negro's relation to the dominant white population and are plays which we must regard as the contribution of a man of extraordinarily sensitive feeling and intuition. He has tried to make us see more clearly the inner tragedy of the black race, of the Negro who dreams and aspires and never attains as he treads his lonely way from birth to death on a road which he can share with no other man.

The value and interest of these plays is three-fold—dramatic, in that they have an amazing theatrical vigor; educational, in that they profess, at least, to rest on accurate observation of many slightly known phases of Negro life and character; racial, in that they furnish definite material for that rapidly developing phase of American life, the emergence of the Negro as a histrionic artist, thus releasing to him one more important channel of useful and constructive action. Barrett Clark, who wrote the introduction to these plays, is convinced that Green is doing for American drama what the writers of the spirituals have done for Negro music. If true, this is of great importance, because it gives the Negro something that he

can call his own—a chance for healthy expression in a field other than that of heavy manual labor without at the same time throwing him into competition with the whites.

If you stop to consider it, this possession of something peculiarly one's own is the essence of that freedom of intellect and emotional force without which political freedom is a bit of a farce. So long as the drama in this country meant purely white drama, the unsuspected talents of the Negro were relegated to, and limited by, the minstrel show and vaudeville clowning. Now there seems to be more than a promise that, with plays directly written for the Negro theatre, he may have his chance to express for us the serious as well as the comic phases of his life, the hopes, the aspirations, and the blights which he experiences, and thus win from all the respect due him as a man without in any way trying to bridge the unhappy barrier that sets the black and white races apart. If Mr. Green is really accomplishing what his admirers believe, his work deserves serious attention for its value in racial development and concord, quite apart from the inherent dramatic worth of the plays themselves.

The same can be said for their educational value, once we accept the validity of Green's observations. Throughout the bleak and tragic pages of "Lonesome Road," one theme seems to stand out above all others—the double-edged fate which strikes all those Negroes in the South who try seriously to elevate themselves above their fellows, either through motives of personal advancement,

or through a more altruistic desire to be helpful to their race. Here we have, perhaps, a problem which is not quite universal. It inheres rather in the conditions of the South itself, where the numerically inferior whites resent any effort of the blacks to encroach on their own fields of education and commerce, and where the blacks themselves still crowd timidly under the shadow of the slave tradition. The aspiring Negro, according to Mr. Green, finds himself opposed, not only by the whites, but by his own race as well. He is as much mistrusted by his own family and friends as, let us say, the ugly-duckling artist who springs unexpectedly and bewilderingly from a white family of settled business traditions. Like all men, black or white, who dare to be different from the standardized community about them, the Negro seeking education courts misunderstanding on every side. In Mr. Green's plays, every misfortune the educated Negro suffers is at once attributed by his friends to his overweening ambitions. And so we find the seeds of his tragedy taking root in the soil of universal suspicion.

On the dramatic and literary side, there can be no question of the power and dramatic strength of Mr. Green's short plays. Their choice of theme, however, is confined largely to the sexual and related aspects of the Negro's life. Even where the other theme of education is introduced, the preoccupation with the animalism of the Negro is apt to remain paramount. It takes the form of showing how easily and readily even the most persistent efforts at self-education are swept away by the torrent

of animal passion. The plays also deal largely and frankly with the problem of mixture of races, and the pseudo-realism so prevalent on the stage today falls here into the usual method of reproducing every blasphemy and vulgarity of speech common to the type of character depicted.

Mr. Green would probably answer that in the twisted and abnormal conditions in which his North Carolina Negroes live, thwarted on every side and misguided both in their religious and mating instincts, the plays must reflect the consequences of this condition if they are to have any value as an exposition of character and environment. To a certain measure, that may be a just answer. Dickens certainly employed an analogous method in "Oliver Twist," and other stories, to effect many needed reforms in England. But Dickens did not confine himself to the one aspect of life. He showed, not only the mire, but the way out. And here is where the art and the good judgment of Mr. Green fall far short of greatness. At times, there is little or no song in his tragedies, and they come very close to the borderland of plays of frustration. Like the earlier works of Eugene O'Neill, his short plays show only a segment rather than a cross-cut of the circle of life. Many an apple is rotten on one side only—where it has been bruised. A gangrenous leg is not the whole man; and so on, right through our experience of life, there is nearly always a potential balance which can be swung to the right side through the weight of constructive action, whether spiritual or surgical, religious or scientific.

In fact, Mr. Green admits that these plays are not generally representative of the Negro race. "Specifically," he writes, "the chief concern here is with the more tragic and uneasy side of Negro life as it has exhibited itself to my notice through a number of years on or near a single farm."

The chief importance, then, of Mr. Green's early work lies less in his achievement, which is imperfect largely through its lack of full spiritual insight, than in the general direction it takes in furnishing serious material for the Negro theatre. With every criticism one might level against it, the fact remains that he is doing a far more constructive work than those seekers after the sensational who are trying to bring the Negro and the white closer together on the same stage.

### *In Abraham's Bosom*

Paul Green's full length play, "In Abraham's Bosom," actually comprises two of the short plays published in "Lonesome Road," with some additional scenes giving it, in its lengthened form, the character of a dramatic biography.

The particular core of tragedy in this Pulitzer Prize play is the struggle of a Negro whose father was white—a Negro whose mind soars like a prophet, with all the intellectual ambition of the white, but whose emotional life is that of his race, a desperate inner conflict which sooner or later must find its counterpart in his outer life. His own race despises him for his love of learning and

for all his efforts to raise them above ignorance and superstition. And among the whites, he is equally an exile, suspected, mistrusted and secretly feared.

It is the total lack of partisan thesis that gives Mr. Green's writing its amazing integrity and power. He is describing, not pleading. He knows his Negro too well to sentimentalize him. It is not the white man who defeats Abraham McCranie, but the children of his own race. Where the ultimate blame lies, that blame which accumulates through centuries, Paul Green does not attempt to say. He is more concerned with the tragedy of present facts than with the abstractions of history. He is still more concerned with the intimate facts that have to do with a particular Abraham McCranie. "Abe is bad mixed up all down inside," says one Negro. "White and black make bad mixtry," answers another. "Nigger down heah," says the first, thumping on his chest, and then, thumping his head, "white mens up heah. Heart say do one thing, head say 'nudder. Bad, bad." And then a third Negro adds, "De white blood in him coming to de top. Dat make him wanta climb up and be sump'n. Nigger gwine hol' him down, dough. Part of him lak de Colonel, part lak his muh, 'vision and misery inside."

In these few words you have the exposition of the whole tragedy, of a story that sweeps through years of struggle, of hope, of defeat, until, driven almost insane by a beating from masked white men, Abraham meets his white half-brother on a lonely road, quivers under his insults and blows, and at last strikes out blindly with

murder in his heart. With his brother's blood on his hands, he comes to his hovel to urge his wife to flee, for he knows his own doom is sealed. Yet even here the majesty of him shines forth. "Blast me, Lawd, in yo' thunder and lightning," he cries out, "burn me in yo' fiery furnace if it is yo' will! Ketch me away in de whirlwind, foh I'm a sinner. Yo' will, yo' will, not mine. . . . I've tried, I've tried to walk de path, but I'm po' and sinful. Give me peace, rest—rest if it is Thy will. Save me, Jesus, save me!"

It is after this prayer that he goes to his cabin door, to be met by the rattle of rifles that carries him to the bosom of eternal mercy. Few plays of recent times have stripped the tortured soul of a man so bare, few have shown the same exaltation of humble heroism. It has been given to Paul Green to show how the highest and the lowest can be implanted in a single human heart and from this tragic inner misery how the last drops of pitiful anguish can be wrung.

Once more, it is to the historic little Provincetown Playhouse that we owed the New York production of this play; the same uncomfortable little theatre which brought Eugene O'Neill to eminence and has, countless times, shown a courage and perception far surpassing that of the commercial hierarchs of Broadway.

The Negro plays of Dubose Heyward have quite a different character from those of Paul Green. They are conceived in a freer dramatic spirit, notably in the case of "Porgy." "Brass Ankle" is more nearly a "thesis" play,

as it treats of the problems of miscegenation. For the time being, however, it is on "Porgy" that the merits of Heyward will rest—Heyward, that is, and his wife, Dorothy Heyward, who helped him with the dramatization of his book on which the play was based.

### *Porgy*

Here, at least, is an example of a play so inextricably bound up with its original production features, that separate discussion of play, acting and direction is almost impossible. The Theatre Guild produced it, using a negro cast on a stage made vivid with the beauty of rags and tumult by Cleon Throckmorton's settings. And the story of Porgy the gambler, beggar, murderer and crippled knight-errant of Catfish Row was unfolded to the beat and direction of Rouben Mamoulian—then an entire newcomer to New York in the magic of welding a play from a script and a score of almost unknown actors.

Mr. Mamoulian received, and deserved, a high and unusual tribute from many of the first-night critics. However much the character of Porgy himself may have dominated Dubose Heyward's book, the play achieved its drama from mass feeling and mob action. Porgy, as a character, dwindled to the proportions of one instrument among many which carried the theme of Negro life in the crowded fishing tenements of Charleston, South Carolina. His simplicity, his frank rascality, his moments of grandeur, his confused vision of his limited universe—these all become in the play the summing-up of forces

eddy about him, a reflection, too, and almost pale at times, of the whole passion of a race. Mr. Mamoulian took the play in exactly these terms and gave it the heightened drama of a people rather than of persons. The result may have been disappointing to those who wished to have reproduced in the theatre the precise emotions and relation of interests they had gathered from the book. But to those catching their impressions fresh from the play—without preconceptions or elusive hopes—the Guild production flashed with the ardor and the sultry magnificence of folk melodrama.

Here and there the effort of the novelist and his wife to retain the original personal strength of *Porgy* somewhat arrests the sweep of the folk tale. This is no perfect play—nor does it rise at all times above the level of a concrete realism which robs it of much of its epic importance. It often uses verbal “shockers” instead of more universal expressions of hate, love and despair. But these are the occasional faults of a work whose larger proportions have the dignity of eternal tragedy.

When *Porgy* was first being talked of as a possible play, I remember hearing discussions of the difficulty of assembling a competent Negro cast. One argument held that the emotional qualities of the Negro made him a born actor; another that these same qualities were very dangerous to a successful production, because of the fact that natural emotions often fail to carry across the footlights as well as competently simulated, or synthetic, emotions. Whatever the theoretical value of this latter argu-

ment, Mr. Mamoulian succeeded in proving that, with expert handling, the Negro can and does project the simpler human passions with astonishing directness and stark power.

The play is unpleasant in many details. It could hardly be otherwise, granted its material, unless a far greater skill were employed to give universal strength to local realism. But I feel sure that when all details are forgotten, one impression will live long, and that is the surging tragedy of a race expressed in the spirituals, in the mass hysteria, and in the occasional uncanny silences—points which achieved theatric magnificence under the guiding hand of Mr. Mamoulian and in the settings of Mr. Throckmorton.

### *John*

At least two American dramatists with a feeling for lyric tragedy have gone back to other scenes and days for their material. Philip Barry, forsaking for a moment the artificial whimsicalities of "White Wings" and "In a Garden," sought in deep earnestness to evoke new values in the tragedy of John the Baptist. In his effort, however, to "rationalize" the motives of John, he merely succeeded in destroying the stature of his central figure, without enhancing the force of the tragedy. He also fell too often into the John Erskine formula of modernizing the speech of many of the characters. There is no question that Barry felt the size and beauty of his theme. He failed only in the technique of execution, and in being unable to rid

himself of a certain mental self-consciousness in his approach to the subject. He did not lose himself in the poetic power of his theme.

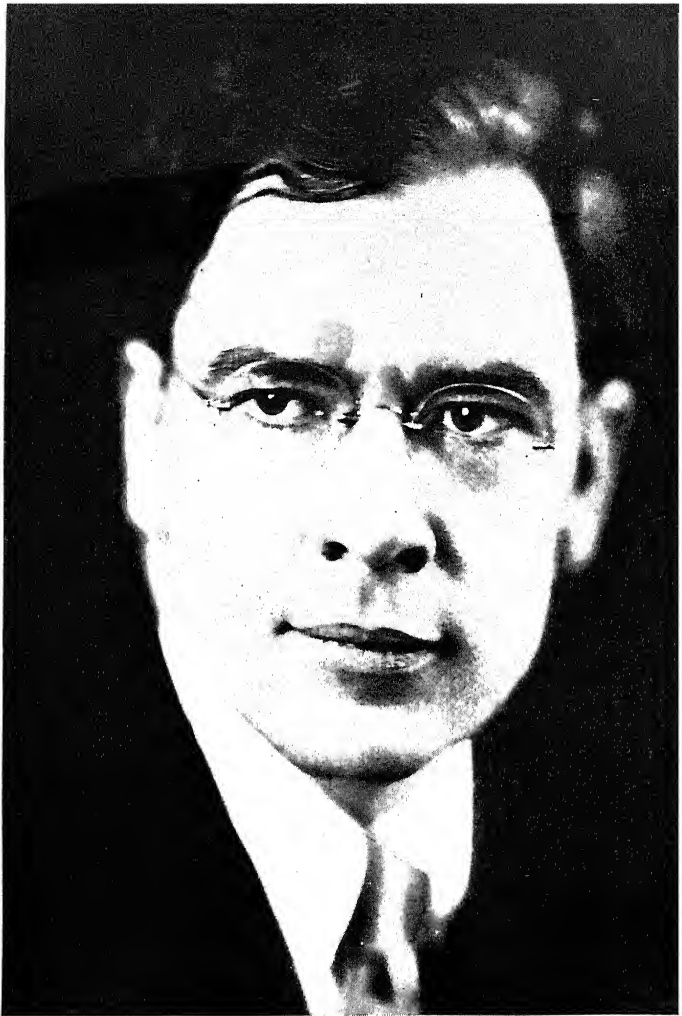
*Elizabeth the Queen*

Maxwell Anderson, on the other hand, selecting the theme of struggle between Queen Elizabeth and her favorite, Essex, succeeded in amazing measure in evoking the true purging fire of tragedy in spite of historical characters whose spiritual instincts were blighted. Sometimes the song of real tragedy can emerge from the stark implications of a theme—as in “Macbeth”—without any of the characters achieving the heroic note. This is what happened in “Elizabeth the Queen”—a tragedy which, at moments, and in spite of its occasional cheap blasphemies, reached almost Shakespearean proportions and power. It will long remain, I believe, one of the most notable American plays.

In this tragedy, the author has not attempted to be too closely historical and has therefore managed to give a portrait of Elizabeth in the terms of her battle between love for the considerably younger Lord Essex and her love of the throne itself. It may, perhaps, have been the intention of the author to make the story a conflict of two characters. But he has inevitably drifted into the unity demanded by good play-writing, and no matter how interesting the study of Essex's character might be, it is the queen who dominates the play at every moment. She is the character with whom the audience identifies itself.

As Mr. Anderson has pictured her, she is a woman already aging markedly. She is both imperious and vulgar, violent in her moods and tragic in her determinations. She is neither lovable nor sympathetic, yet one manages easily to understand her and to realize the strange and fatal atmosphere of intrigue and uncertainty with which the throne of England was surrounded at that time. She refers in one place with bitter humor to the fact that her childhood was warped by never knowing from month to month who her next mother would be! Behind this careless remark, one glimpses a vista of the turbulence, tragedy and silent horror which must have shaped her youth and given her that torturing sense of uncertainty which engulfs her at every moment.

We see her surrounded by such arch-plotters as Sir Walter Raleigh and Robert Cecil—men who actually controlled her destiny (though the play does not make this clear) by controlling the purse-strings of the empire, but who were still uncertain enough of their power and position to make them resent bitterly the favors showered upon Lord Essex. The love of the queen for her favorite is no secret at the court, but what very few of the cabal realize is the deep psychological impulse which governs the relations of Elizabeth and Essex. When they are alone together, most of their time is spent in wounding each other. The furious jealousy of the queen does not permit her a single instant of enjoyment when she is with her lover. She is not only jealous of his affections, but even more deeply resentful of his lust for power. She would



MAXWELL ANDERSON

. . . caught Shakespearean tragedy in "Elizabeth the Queen."



like to destroy him as a menace to her own authority, yet, because he helps her to cling to her fleeting youth and because his love for her is strangely real, she needs him too intensely to be able to give way utterly to her jealousy and resentment.

Essex, for his part, is equally torn. In the play, he is never quite conscious of how much he really owes to the queen for the opportunities she has given him. He is largely carried away by the personal popularity he enjoys with the English people—a popularity based partly on his personality and partly on his record as a general in Spain. He has dreams of empire in terms of warfare and conquest. He accuses Elizabeth of womanly cowardice in attempting to keep her kingdom at peace. Yet she exerts a genuine fascination upon him which he cannot throw off. He is evidently fully aware of her increasing age, but her mind holds him as keenly enthralled as if she were still in her first youth.

We thus have a dual struggle on both sides, this love of power in one form or another supremely controlling both Elizabeth and Essex and tearing them apart while personal devotion draws them together. This is the seed of the tragedy as Mr. Anderson has written it. It is tragedy in the truest sense of a culmination which grows out of the inevitable characters of these two people. One or the other must conquer completely. Eternal compromise is impossible, especially when their relations are governed by a curious honesty which compels each of them to tell the other the truth.

Thanks to the machinations of Cecil, Essex leaves to take command of the invading forces in Ireland. The letters back and forth between himself and the queen are intercepted. Everything is done to fan their jealousy and mistrust. Finally, Essex returns at the head of his troops with the populace of London crying out, "Long live Essex, down with Elizabeth!" But even at this crisis, the queen is not willing to believe fully in Essex's perfidy. She makes no resistance to his advance and summons him directly into her presence. The scene between them, alone, is undoubtedly the high spot of the play. Their misunderstanding is rapidly cleared up, and it appears for a moment that they will rule England together. But at this crisis, Essex, impelled by his fanatic honesty, admits that he wishes power more than anything else in the world. When Elizabeth refuses to make him king consort, he threatens her. This threat opens her eyes at last to the real nature of the conflict between them. She pretends to yield to his wish and then, when he dismisses his troops, summons her own palace guard and has him sent to the tower. If ever the suicide of a soul was portrayed on the stage, it is in the moment when Elizabeth sends Essex to his death, knowing that in doing so she is killing everything in herself except her one determination to rule.

The final scene in Elizabeth's apartment in the tower, during the hour before Essex's execution, is no anticlimax. This ultimate self-torture of Elizabeth becomes an imperishable moment.

As one glances backward at these achievements of

American dramatic poets—an outpouring in the space of a few short years—it is hard to see wherein any one can question the probable developments of the next great period we are entering. Given the greater maturity and insight which years of world-wide distress and uncertainty inevitably foster, the tragic poets of America, those we already know, and those whose ideas are being moulded today, should soon reach a plane such as the theatre enjoys only at the culmination of long and arduous decades.

## CHAPTER IV

### TRAGEDY WITHOUT SONG

ONE has to cling to the simplest things and the sturdiest to hold a footing in the mental tornado of these post-war days. When the theatre, mirroring the turmoil of these great winds, grows complex and obscure, when fair and reasoned judgments become exceedingly difficult to make, and when we see the finest creative minds laboring in blind circles, then the old folk tales, born of the simplest and sturdiest instincts of men, come to our rescue. They seem to hold the secret of the innermost forces of the soul.

A princess, a knight and a dragon may seem vastly remote from some modern tragedy—as, perhaps, “*Desire Under the Elms*.” Yet that old folk-lore triangle stands as a robust symbol of all that may lend song and beauty—or disaster—to the tragic poem. The princess loves her knight, yet, curiously enough, she will not give him her love while he stays languishingly by her side. She wants to test him first, and to make this test complete she sends him away from her. He must leave her enthralling presence and go forth in the mud and slime to kill the many-headed dragon that has been scourging the countryside.

Up to this point, we have merely the setting and the

conditions of a great trial. From now on, three things are possible. The knight may kill the dragon—in which case we have heroic drama, or, if you will, romance. Or he may die fighting, trying gloriously to prove his love—in which case we have lyric tragedy. Or, again, the knight may turn and run when he first sees the dragon, or after his first futile effort to cut off the many heads of the beast, and as he runs, the dragon may leap after him and devour him. In that case, we have tragedy without song, the ultimate cowardice or despair or discouragement, which even love cannot fortify and turn to valor.

Now, I am perfectly aware that many of our modern sophisticates will laugh at this comparison. They will call it childlike and absurd—and my only answer can be that it is this same childish absurdity that has lived through the life of the human race, and that it is the theme of the only literature that has come down to us from days beyond recorded history. With obvious variations, it rests near the core of all the great mythologies, it animates the Homeric songs, it is repeated in a thousand tales of legendary chivalry. In other words, it is humanity's own history of mankind. Possibly some bespectacled psychiatrist may think he has discovered some deeper formula, or some complicated motive which absolves the modern knight from all shame if he makes a tasty meal of himself for the hungry dragon. But I fancy the princess would still feel ashamed of her knight, even if he is too neurotic to feel any shame for himself. Basically, the thing loved, the lover and the test of the love remain the core of drama,

and no matter how many yellow psychoses the lover may offer in excuse, he can not fail in his test and still sing a song of triumph as he is ingloriously swallowed feet first!

The trouble with much that passes for modern tragedy is simply that it would be high comedy if it were not so unhappy. We have evolved a sort of psychopathic sadism which insists on blowing trumpets about the turn-tail knight. The officiating dragon who swallows him has many forms—as many, in fact, as the seven capital sins, with the betting odds, however, favoring that age-old shocker, lust. O'Neill has the good grace to pay some attention to pride and possessiveness. But he is enough of a true poet (or was, until he discovered psychoanalysis) to realize that all seven heads of the dragon are hungry. The rest of the would-be poetic crew are sufficiently puritan at heart to brand scarlet letters even on a Magdalen—not to mention looking for sex motives in a bank robbery. Rather than admit the cowardice of their hero, they glorify his temptation. His surrender becomes a romance. The dragon's mastication of him brings tears of sublimated pity. The only wonder is that the dragon does not get chronic indigestion. But possibly the dragon, too, has become a bit sophisticated!

### *Strange Interlude*

Among the more distinguished of the recent song-less tragedies, O'Neill's "Strange Interlude" undoubtedly holds first place, largely, I think, because it shows suf-

ficient maturity to deal with the almost satanic pride and possessiveness of a universalized feminine figure.

This much is certain, that O'Neill has managed to contrive a dramatic story of absorbing interest, and that he has no difficulty in holding the attention of the audience for five hours, and across the stretch of a dinner intermission, as against the two and one-half hours permitted to the average playwright. In spite of this, I am not convinced that he has achieved, in the full sense, a great play. "Strange Interlude" probes deeply and terribly into the recesses of a neurotic mind, as summed up in the character of Nina Leeds. It probes also into many other types of mind, and as a work of intuitive though untrained psychology, it is undoubtedly a monumental achievement. But to regard it as a great play chiefly because of its illuminating use of the "aside," is somewhat like regarding a piece of statuary as a great piece of sculpture because the brush of a painter has added to it the color of life. Such a statue might be a great work of art, in the sense that it combines the finest qualities of two of the arts, but it might be neither a great statue nor a great painting.

We admit this distinction readily enough in the case of opera. Richard Wagner attempted to fuse the arts of the drama and of music and, being unwilling to have his works spoken of as opera, solved the problem simply by calling them "music dramas." Under this name we are often willing to call them great works of art, with a general inclination to admit that the music is greater than

the dramas themselves. But we do not say, for example, that "Parsifal" is a great play, although its interest and its emotional intensity are vastly heightened by the musical score. For this reason I think it is a great mistake and a distinct injustice to other dramatists to speak of O'Neill's combination of two separate arts (the art of the novelist, as exemplified in the "asides," and the art of the dramatist in the straightforward action) as a great play—to call it possibly the greatest play produced by the American theatre. He has combined the arts of the novelist and the playwright and given us what, for want of a better description, we can only call a dramatic novel. And in this particular example, the element of the novel achieves higher and greater proportions than the element of the play, just as the music of Wagner achieves a greatness lacking in his dramas taken alone.

Certainly there can be no objection to creating this new form of expression, and when it is handled with the power and ruthless searching of O'Neill's mind, the resultant whole deserves respect. But although the fusion of the arts can be a fine thing in itself, it is very misleading to assume that the separate arts have ceased to exist, or that henceforth no play can be truly great which does not make use of the art of the novel as well. The bald truth is that O'Neill has covered a great deal of second-rate playwriting by some very intensive use of the novelist's privileges. In spite of certain obvious faults, Sidney Howard's "The Silver Cord" is a far finer play than the dramatic elements of "Strange Interlude" considered

alone. Yet the final product of O'Neill's pen, provided you do not think of it solely as a play, is vastly more absorbing and exciting than anything Sidney Howard has written.

What O'Neill has really done is to take a rather morbid story of mediocre people and give it an almost universal importance by a careful side exposition of the motives, conscious and unconscious, that are guiding his characters. These asides are vastly more interesting than anything in the dialogue proper of the play. They touch upon experiences common to nearly all mankind. It is as if O'Neill were applying a sort of spiritual X-ray to the souls of his characters. To do this it is necessary for the characters, every few minutes, to remain absolutely stationary and, in a tone quite different from the ordinary dialogue, speak out the truth which they are concealing from each other. A good actor would probably tell you that at least half of these concealed emotions could be expressed through gesture, or manner, or through the hundred and one tricks known to the artist. An actor might even make the suggestion that the play, with a little skilful rewriting of the main dialogue, could convey in conventional form everything which O'Neill has now placed in the asides. This, however, is rather unfair to O'Neill's intention and also to what he has actually accomplished. For in many of the asides he has made the characters reveal certain hidden depths of which they themselves are probably almost unconscious.

The human mind seems to work on at least three main

levels—the thoughts it shares with the world in speech or writing, the private thoughts it reserves, and the deeper sources of action or feeling which it often strives to keep from its own consciousness because of the cruelty or the selfishness or the pride which they seem to reveal. Jules Bois has suggested still another level—the superconscious, whence we derive our sense of aspiration and idealism. The old-fashioned aside merely gave the audience the advantage of touching the second level. O'Neill's asides dive to the depths of the third level, the repressed thoughts, the unworthy emotions, the egotism, the pride or the possessiveness that so often stimulate us to apparently unaccountable action. It is this revelation of the semi-conscious or subconscious which constitutes O'Neill's unique achievement, and which will undoubtedly stand to many for the greatness of his play, whereas in fact it stands only for the keenness of his intuition as an analyst of human emotions and actions. It is notable that he touches nothing which might be identified with Bois' superconscious.

There is a great deal of Jung and a certain amount of Freud mixed up with the intuitions which are purely those of O'Neill. His explanation of the curious action of Nina Leeds would not find universal acceptance among all schools of modern psychology. We can imagine a cynical behaviorist remarking to himself, "Interesting if true." Thus when Nina's father dies, O'Neill assumes that the curious and unimpassioned love which she bestows upon the novelist, Charles Marsden, is a psychological

transference of the love previously given to her father. On the other hand, this particular attachment might be explained on the ground that every human being desires at certain times the comfort of a love which does not ask too much in return. Or again, it might be said that Nina is merely exhibiting an automatic reaction from the intensity of her other emotional experiences. And so it is that throughout the play you have a hundred varied explanations for events, through motives which, while intensely interesting to unravel and often approaching universal symptoms, are so limited by a particular psychological creed in interpretation as to lose much of their general importance. In many recent popular murder trials we have been regaled with interpretations supplied by various schools of psychologists. Each one was interesting in its own way, but they often differed radically in their deductions from known facts. O'Neill's asides, then, vary greatly in importance according to the particular prejudices of the audience and according to which way you happen to account for the vagaries of human actions under given conditions.

The story of the play itself is comparatively trite. Nina Leeds is engaged to a young aviator who is killed. She might have married him but for the opposition of her father. She then decides to go into hospital nursing and gives her love promiscuously to various crippled soldiers in the belief that she is somehow making reparation to her dead hero. She discovers her mistake and marries Sam Evans, a personable but uninspired young man with

whom she believes she can lead a normal life undisturbed by any great passion. To her horror, however, she discovers that there is a history of persistent insanity in the Evans family. Rather than bring another child of this tainted blood into the world, she destroys the life that is already started and, with the idea of satisfying Sam's craving for fatherhood, arranges to have a child by another man named Darrell. Sam, knowing nothing of this, and inspired by his pride of fatherhood, progresses rapidly in material things and becomes a highly successful business man, of rather mediocre mentality. Nina, in the meantime, has fallen in love with Darrell and years of her life thereafter are spent in trying to resolve the conflict between her love for him, and her determination to make Sam Evans happy at all costs. The child grows up having an instinctive hatred for his own father and a genuine devotion for Sam Evans, his supposed father. During all of this time Charles Marsden, the novelist, has been always on hand, ready with comfort and unselfish devotion, but quite unable to inspire in Nina any more complete instinct of love. In the end, Sam Evans dies from a stroke, Nina and Darrell find that the passion of their youth has gone, and Nina settles down in the ashen sunset of her life with the tranquil companionship of Marsden, her son having left her to marry, in spite of her frantic efforts to hold him.

Nina is thus meant to typify in herself the possessive and absorbing type of woman who draws to herself, and involves in her own neurotic cravings, the lives of all she

touches. It is not until the very end of her days that she fully relinquishes the desire to gather to herself every form of male love. The explanation which O'Neill affords, by means of the asides, to this curious human entanglement is the outstanding interest of this obviously unpleasant theme. It does not seem to occur to him that Nina's ultimate relinquishment of desire is merely the passivity of a burned-out soul and in no sense a resolution of the conflicting forces within her. Possibly the most curious of all the aspects of "Strange Interlude" is the extent to which everything that is true and real, including the life of an unborn child, is sacrificed to the development of Sam's quite uninteresting and highly extraverted success. Is it possible that, in the writing of this play, O'Neill was foreshadowing (as real poets so often do) the deep change in his own mental life which led him to write, as his next play, that death chant of the extravert which he called "Dynamo"?

### *Dynamo*

"Dynamo" was a prompt failure when produced by the Theatre Guild. Moreover, its scenic requirements are so elaborate that it will probably not be revived frequently—if at all. Nevertheless, it is a very important play in the sense that it marks a crisis in O'Neill's creative life and illustrates some of the many untoward things which may happen to a poet when he tries to become a philosopher.

O'Neill had abandoned, some time before, writing

about life as he had experienced it, and had taken up the task of dissecting the inmost impulses of the mind in the terms of objective drama. In one sense, therefore, his later work is more truly creative, the characters and their environment springing entirely from his mind, and representing life forces and viewpoints rather than real types we are apt to meet in time and place. But along with this greater creative freedom, O'Neill chose, bit by bit, to assume the rôle of philosophic poet, seeking to interpret problems of the day through drama. In this process it is plain to see that he has found the poet in himself at war with the groping thinker, and that the authentic character of his work has suffered from the conflict. His characters have become conscious creations willing to do his bidding as occasion demands. They are, sad to relate, little more in actuality than O'Neill's responsive robots.

In discussing any recent O'Neill play, it is always well to distinguish between his apparent, or popular, importance and his real importance. In the popular mind he has become something more than dramatist and poet. He has become one of America's leading thinkers on the more profound questions of life. As a matter of fact, however, his thinking is of a very shallow order, frequently trite in the extreme and enormously over-influenced by his emotions. His real importance lies in the strength of his raw feelings and in his ability to convert these feelings into dramatic situations that sweep over an audience like flame. His sense of theatrical values is rich and true. His sense of words, as one means of con-

veying feeling, is surpassingly apt. He is somewhat like the famous old preacher who could utter the word "Mesopotamia" with such profound emotion that it brought tears to the eyes of half his congregation. O'Neill experiences, let us say, a perfectly simple feeling in relation to one of his characters—but by the time he has clothed that feeling in clamorous words and in the double-thick atmosphere of theatrical suggestion, he has endowed it with something apparently approaching universal importance.

Nor is there anything inherently spurious about this process. The simpler feelings are the more universal ones, and it is only because we ourselves have become deadened in our perceptions that they seem banal when the average person talks or writes about them. O'Neill is really rendering a great service when he reestablishes for us, through our emotions, the universal import of simple things. The poet sees a symphony of life in a sunset, whereas the ordinary man sees only a pretty isolated picture, and if the poet can succeed in giving the ordinary man a pair of magic glasses through which he too can glimpse the symphony, then the poet has achieved lasting importance.

But the cold processes of the intellect are rarely combined successfully with the intuitions and the expressive power of the poet. When they are, the world finds itself confronted with a genius like Dante. The trouble with O'Neill of late has been his quite evident ambition to intellectualize his primitive poetic power. Instead of fusing

the two faculties, he has unconsciously let one choke the other. Up to the present, this has never been more apparent nor more painful than in "Dynamo." It is a play with many tense theatrical moments, and with a few flashes of raw power, but for the most part it is a fairly deliberate attempt to project upon a helpless and half-hypnotized public the intellectual confusion of O'Neill's own mind—a confusion brought about, as I have suggested, by the war between his intelligence and his emotions.

O'Neill has told us, in a letter to George Jean Nathan, that "Dynamo" is the first of a trilogy of plays that "will dig at the roots of the sickness of today as I feel it—the death of an old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with." This is really a very illuminating statement—not as to the play itself, as O'Neill intends it, but as to O'Neill's own frame of mind; the placid assumption of "the death of an old God," not, you will notice, the "loss of an old God," nor man's momentary blindness to Him. Not even the loss of the true God—permitting the thought that perhaps man, in his material race, has substituted a God of the letter for the true God of the spirit. No. To satisfy O'Neill, it must be nothing less than the unqualified death of an old God; and the many blasphemies in the play flow from that smug assumption. Then comes the shallow half-truth that science and materialism have

not given any satisfying new god to take the place of the Old. But what thinker of any depth or penetration ever expected science and materialism of themselves, to furnish a new god? The story of the golden calf is as old as mankind. Materialism never has satisfied mankind, and never will, and no man with an ounce of observation or sense imagines it ever will. And as to science, what can it ever do by itself more than it has done throughout the ages—increase our knowledge of the mechanics of good and evil? Each new discovery only adds to the immensity of our ignorance—so that we might well say that man has more cause today than in a primeval forest to look in awe at the universe and to seek in its vast design and complexity the unity that is the will of God. Science may some day drive the world back to God—but to suggest that science should furnish a new God is like asking a violin to furnish new music. The instrument can never become the creator—the handiwork can never make the hand.

O'Neill, of course, is using words somewhat in the poetic sense, and it might be considered unfair to dissect their meaning literally. But in the present instance it is important to do so. It is important for the reason that he sets himself up as the analyst of a great world sickness of the day and proposes to dig at its roots with his intellect as well as his poetic intuition; and we can judge the fitness of his intellect for his self-appointed job only by the evidences he gives of clear thinking or the contrary. All he really does in "Dynamo" is to express a deep and

obvious discontent with the God of the letter and to show the tragedy of any attempt to set up the marvels of science as a substitute god. Both parts of his task are therefore negative. In all charity we might say that, given time, O'Neill may arrive by the process of elimination at rediscovering the true God of the spirit Who has never died. But this may take years, and in the meantime, the O'Neill public must apparently be led by the nose through the maze of his own mental confusions and, thanks to his dramatic power, be made to suffer with him vicariously in his attempts to disentangle himself.

In the story of "Dynamo," a minister's son comes under the scathing influence of the village atheist (who is also the superintendent of the local power plant) and renounces the God of his fathers for the new god of electricity, as symbolized in the dynamo. The dynamo becomes for the boy the figure of all generative force, something essentially female, and through it he hopes to discover the hidden meaning of life. He transfers his instinct for fanatical worship from God to the dynamo until he actually prays to it and offers it the sacrifice of a vow of celibacy. The atheist's daughter becomes reasonably jealous of his new devotion and tries to "bring him down to earth" by making him love her again—which he does. Thereupon he feels he has been unfaithful to his new god, shoots the girl and electrocutes himself in the dynamo! Upon this bare outline O'Neill has constructed a play of considerable power in which, through atmosphere and suggestion, he makes the boy's worship of the

dynamo seem quite credible and the final tragedy assume astonishing proportions. But all the atmosphere in the world can not blind us to the bare fact that O'Neill has been shallow even in his choice of symbols. Had he taken, not the dynamo, nor even electricity, but rather the mysterious magnetic field from which electric generation emerges, he would at least have been approaching that analogy science has revealed by which magnetism and cohesion can be compared to the binding force of the universe—the force which expresses for us in time and space the binding love and the will of God. But instead, as in his letter to Mr. Nathan, O'Neill has preferred the outer surface symbol to the inner reality, the handiwork for the hand, and so has lost himself completely in an angry ocean of the senses.

It is rather a relief to turn from this later-phase O'Neill and his unfinished trilogy about "world" sickness, to the man who first brought the intuitive tragic sense to mature power on the American stage. This earlier O'Neill is plainly a troubled and sincere mind, torn between the alluring beauty of an ideal world and the vast mountain of disillusionment, drabness, irony and decay which he sees about him everywhere he goes. He is a witness to innumerable minor tragedies both of soul and body that escape most of us in our preoccupation with the obvious tasks of life. He seems to gather these tragedies to himself, to become a tortured part of them, and then, in a mood which is half exasperation and half bitter pain, to lay them bare for us on the stage.

*S. S. Glencairn*

We have an exceptional chance to see the genesis of much that O'Neill has accomplished in the four episodes of life on the seas grouped under the name of "S. S. Glencairn." For these were his early efforts, bitter, sardonic, rather chaotic efforts, not worth very much in themselves, but of value precisely because they show more clearly than finished and maturer work the bent of mind and soul which later produced "The Hairy Ape," "Great God Brown" and "Desire Under the Elms." It might be worth while, for a moment, to look at "S. S. Glencairn" as if it were our first introduction to an unknown O'Neill.

Here we have four glimpses of the sea as witnessed by a very special type of mind. It is not enough to say that any normally high-bred and sensitive young man would gather the same impression from long service in the fore-castle. That would be untrue. One of the classic stories of the sea, "Two Years Before the Mast," was written by a Harvard graduate, a young man of sensitive tastes, who spent two years of his life as a common sailor, and in later years proved his thinness of skin by a passionate devotion to the freedom of the slaves which cost him many hours of anguish and bitter trial. Yet his total impression of the sea and its life, in days noted for cruelty and crushing circumstance, was wholly unlike O'Neill's. I do not mean that the facts were different, but rather the mental impression from the facts. The difference, I think, lies in

this: that one was able to hold himself aloof sufficiently to obtain a perspective, whereas the other made every incident a part of himself and suffered doubly, first in the seeing and then in the living of the other man's experience. O'Neill can not disentangle himself from events. In this lies his power and his weakness.

Dramatically the four episodes of "S. S. Glencairn" are unimportant. They show a definite interpretive ability, the power to convey to you and me a mood or the inner tragedy of a situation, but they utterly lack creative genius as applied to the theatre. That is, they do not by plot, arrangement, dialogue nor even by characterization pass beyond the trite and obvious. There is no inner suspense, no alternation of mood, no situation which, through forcing a decision, serves as a test of character. There is no moment in which the brute is raised above himself, or the finer man faces catastrophe. At times there is a sentimentality which is almost maudlin. Yet withal, O'Neill makes you feel the mood of the sea as he himself has felt it. The drama, such as it is, is the drama which you yourself, as spectators, supply—the powerful, insistent awesome brooding of the sea itself. It is drama suggested, not created.

But if these episodes lack importance for the theatre, they yield a rich commentary on O'Neill himself. Their very lack of dramatic value shows to what an extent O'Neill allows himself to absorb and be absorbed by a mood, or the imagined sufferings of others. This, as I said, is his great weakness, one which he overcame to a

large extent in his middle period, but which will rise persistently to plague him as he passes from one sombre mood to another. It is also his strength, in so far as his keen responsiveness to suffering, or to injustice, or to the tragedy of a great mental conflict, furnishes him with richer and more varied materials to mould and fashion. But it is essential for every dramatist or story-teller to be able, at some point, to step back from his work and glimpse it as if it were a thing apart, to be certain that merely because he feels something very strongly himself he has not exaggerated the importance of the obvious nor weakened its force through lack of contrast. O'Neill in most of his work is too much like a very powerful swimmer too far from land in the ocean of his own feeling.

### *Desire Under the Elms*

"Desire Under the Elms," although far surpassing "S. S. Glencairn," or even "The Hairy Ape," in dramatic power, is still of the same mood, the same fibre and the same impassioned despair. O'Neill not only writes tragedies. All too often, he is a tragedy.

"Desire Under the Elms" gives us the story of one year in the life of Ephraim Cabot, seventy-five years old, and twice a widower. He has two sons by his first wife, who leave him in the first act to seek gold in California, and a third son, Eben, by his second wife. Eben lives in the memory of his mother, and in the passionate conviction that the farm was rightly hers and should become his.

But Ephraim, a hard and lonely soul, brooding on the severities of the Old Testament, marries again, and brings to the farm Abbie, a young wife. Eben takes this as an insult to his mother—until he suddenly discovers that his hate for Abbie has become an impassioned love. Through her he thinks he has found a way of avenging Ephraim's cruelty and injustice to his mother. In his tangled mind, Abbie becomes for him both mother and mistress. They have a child—which the aged Ephraim believes to be his own.

Here, of course, the analogy to the ancient *Œdipus* tragedy becomes obvious—an analogy modified to meet the beliefs of one school of modern psychology, and distinctly without the spiritual clarity and elevation which forever stamped genius on the Greek drama. In Greek tragedy, the full import of the downfall was always heightened by the explicit or implied contrast between the creative and the destructive forces of life whereas in O'Neill's work the whole action is keyed to the one pitch of the destructive. It is not *Paradise Lost* so much as *Paradise Unknown*.

Yet to a limited extent, the tragedy of the last act also follows the Greek formula.

No sooner is the child born, than Eben is led to believe that Abbie has tricked him again—that she has wanted the child only to insure her lifelong possession of his mother's farm, and to cheat him of his inheritance. He accuses her of this. Thinking to prove her love for him, Abbie smothers the child, only to find that this incites

his horror as well as his hatred. In anguish, Eben rushes to the village and summons the sheriff. Repenting of this almost immediately, he returns to beg Abbie's forgiveness, blaming himself for inspiring the murder. He finds that Abbie has confessed the truth to old Ephraim. The sheriff comes to the house, and Eben surrenders himself as a partner in the crime—leaving the gaunt Ephraim to be proud of his son's last act of courage and to face his last years wholly alone.

This is the barest outline of a plot that finds enhanced grimness in a hundred details of irony, cumulative gloom, and well calculated suspense. Once you accept the theme, its working out is intense and often masterly. But the theme itself is the very point that demands challenge, both in its value as true drama and in its title even to poetic realism. O'Neill could plead that such things do happen, and particularly that given the Puritan background, the lonely farm, and the various outward circumstances, this very thing would be likely to happen. But that is not enough. O'Neill is not merely a journalistic playwright reporting events. He is also a poet and a philosopher, and he allows himself the poet's privilege of interpreting the outward action by its subjective motives. And this is where I think he departs from accord with life, where he sees only the fungus and the decaying logs in the forest. He selects as his material the degrading influences alone. He sings only the songs of the Furies and the chants of Eros. It is only natural that whenever he thinks and writes in this damp prison, there can be for

O'Neill nothing but tragedy—the pitiful and weak tragedy of one who does not even know the sunlight and the richer love he has lost.

It would be a fascinating study, if time and space permitted, to take up one by one all the plays of O'Neill and to relate them, in their curious sequence, not only to his own periods of growth and occasional retrogression, but also to the whole problem of tragedy. O'Neill would then become merely a symbol for forces at conflict in the poetic and creative mind. But the particular plays I have selected, with "Great God Brown" among the lyric tragedies, and the others among the stunted or shut-in tragedies, may serve the purpose of illustrating what appear to me as the chief facets of his interesting literary character. "Dynamo" certainly marked a crisis—possibly the end of O'Neill's negative period, during which he was dissatisfied with his old god, the intuitive poetic instinct, and yet was unable to find anything but death in the new god of outer circumstance. He may yet, through his undoubted suffering, find the spiritual balance that could elevate him to genius—something to offset the false pride of "Lazarus Laughed," the false quest of "Dynamo," and the lust for power or possession running through "Emperor Jones," "Desire Under the Elms" and "Strange Interlude." Just as "Beyond the Horizon" and "The Hairy Ape" held dimly the rumor of "Great God Brown," these other plays, for all their clash and anguish and apparently futile search, may lead to a rediscovery of the "tears that rise to form the laughter of heaven." The

deep frustration that lay behind the delicate mockery of "Marco Millions," in which one felt that O'Neill chided himself as Ibsen once did in "The Wild Duck," may give way to real inner illumination.

Few other tragedies of the non-lyric kind have merited the distinction of O'Neill's in recent years. Martin Flavin once wrote a play called "Children of the Moon" which held large promise. But it has had no comparable successor. John Howard Lawson followed his fine "Processional" with "Nirvana," a discouraged and discouraging piece of work which utterly failed to achieve what the former play had rumored. Probably the four plays best representing the American feeling for tragedy, minus the lyric impulse and lacking in certain cases the sensitive overtones of O'Neill's, are "Lucky Sam McCarver" by Sidney Howard, "Coquette" by Ann Preston Bridgers and George Abbott, "Berkeley Square" by John Balderston and "Machinal" by Sophie Treadwell. Two of these, "Coquette," and "Berkeley Square," were distinct successes. The others, for what I believe are inherent reasons, are more interesting in their failure than many plays in commercial good graces.

### *Lucky Sam McCarver*

Sidney Howard, the author of "They Knew What They Wanted," certainly commands a high place in American playwriting. But only a facile enthusiasm for brutal portraiture would impel one to accept his attempt

at real tragedy in "Lucky Sam McCarver." On the other hand, if one is sufficiently conscious of the wall of enmity erecting itself between thousands of individuals today, of the terrific sweep of selfish purpose in the world, of the way pride can throttle the least impulses of creative purpose, then one might feel that Sam McCarver and the woman he marries stand as a sardonic comment on the great human impasse. There are moments of swift power in this play, of bitter truth and scathing laughter. But of yearning, of aspiration, of the rumor of creative currents—of that faint though thrilling promise which Lawson wove into his "Processional"—there is not a trace. Throughout its course there is a freezing of the soul. It ends in polar night.

For this reason it is not real drama at all. It moves on a straight descending line, and not in a swinging cycle. The rather obvious defense that it is true to life seems to fall to pieces before the most obvious fact that like so many other plays it is only true to half of life. It is just what its author calls it in a sub-title—four episodes. But the episodes all have their faces turned one way, whereas life as one experiences it has a face toward the sun as well as one toward the dark wall of night. I think Sidney Howard honestly meant to convey rather more than the play states. I think he meant it to be a drama of isolation and loneliness—of the death of the soul in the pursuit of the phantoms of pride. If so, he simply did not succeed, because this inner hunger and this secret death, to

achieve dramatic meaning, must in some measure be conveyed either by outward action or by powerful inference. And I found neither in Sam McCarver.

The first episode shows Sam McCarver as the proprietor of a Broadway night club on New Year's eve. You learn of his early life as mug-washer in a Hoboken saloon. You see the rigid common sense that has already brought him up the material ladder. You catch the restlessness which urges him still higher—the calculating passion which makes him want to marry Carlotta Ashe because she has been born in a world above him but has compromised enough with his own world to bring her within his ambitions. You see him take the risk of a shooting affray on his own shoulders because this act will put Carlotta in his debt.

In the second episode, he has married Carlotta and begun a successful Wall Street career. There is still the possibility of creative love between them, which Sam promptly kills by selling out his respect for Carlotta to entrench his own career. It is at this moment that Carlotta pours out the whole bitterness of her soul in the ironic protest—"Do talk grammar!"

The third episode is in the American colony in Venice. The scene is intended to motivate the disgust which finally makes Sam throw over Carlotta. It is the least skilful part of the whole play, reeking with the atmosphere of perversion and degeneracy. Placing the scene in Venice is in itself a wild excursion which breaks all sense of unity. It would have been more difficult, perhaps, but far more

compact and effective to have placed it in New York.

The final episode is in a cheap New York apartment where Carlotta has become the mistress of an oily stock broker. Sam comes to offer her a more honorable support, which she refuses. He then begins to boast of his success, to berate Carlotta, and to tell her how little she has meant to him in his climb. While he is talking, she quietly dies, hidden from his sight in the depths of a big wing-backed chair. For a moment he is stunned when he discovers what has happened. Then he remembers an important business engagement. There is a moment of struggle—and business wins. He takes up his hat and coat and leaves.

There was a time of course when Sam and Carlotta might have redeemed each other. Now, I don't want to insist for an instant that Mr. Howard should have turned this into a story of redemption; but having once chosen to head for deep tragedy, he ought to have carried his theme through. Death only scratches the surface of tragedy. The instinct of drama demands a revealing somewhere of what the inner death in Sam's own soul was to mean to him—if not in present action at least in the rumor of future agony. Only half the story has been told. The second and most important part has not even been indicated. One feels that Howard's sense of irony and a good curtain buried his sense of universal drama.

One more thing remains to be said. It relates to the tiresome theme of blasphemy in the theatre. Mr. Howard knows as well as any one, and better than his cheap and

recent imitators, that the blasphemous use of the name of God or Christ by characters on the stage is totally unnecessary in a really strong play. It is a sign of weakness to have to resort to it—just as italicizing words is a sign of weakness in good prose. One is meant to give realism to characters, the other to give the reality of spoken emphasis to the written word. Neither is necessary to the expert. But above and beyond this, there is a supreme distinction between mere coarse, strong language, between a biblical downrightness in calling things by their own names and the misuse of the name of God for theatrical effect. The former can only offend squeamish taste, can only touch surface conventions; the latter violates what is a deep inner reality to thousands of persons. I should say exactly the same thing if I were an atheist—only that I would then add this polite comparison: a man might show disrespect for his own parents, but he would knock down any one else who insulted them. Howard and his fellow realists might remember this in estimating their offense against those who differ with them on the reverence due to the name of God. Only the McCarvers violate the realities of the lives of others because it furthers an immediate alluring purpose!

### *Coquette*

Joint authorship is rare in tragedy. But "Coquette," by George Abbott and Ann Preston Bridgers, managed to attain much of the unity of feeling essential to the tragic theme. They fashioned two acts of a memorably sensi-

tive play from material originally suggested by Miss Bridgers, and then wandered into the by-paths of unnecessary plot and contriving for a third act, which, as a matter of important theatrical record, was held together only by the unforgettable playing of one of the true artists of our theatre, Helen Hayes. I cannot share the general unrestrained enthusiasm for the play as a whole, nor, on the other hand, can I find words adequate to describe the apparently fragile yet strong and enduring artistry of Miss Hayes. Her growth as an actress in the two years leading up to her appearance in "Coquette" was an event almost unparalleled in the modern theatre, springing, as it most certainly did, not from the mere chance of a good vehicle coming her way, but from a sort of inner flame.

The story of "Coquette" is woven from the antique chivalry, the primitive aristocracy and the over-protected womanhood of the South. Dr. Besant's daughter, Norma, comes before us as one of those dainty flowers whose instinct for innocent flirtation has been nourished for generations in the hothouse of a land of soft-voiced troubadours. She meets Michael Jeffery, a young man of hot blood, careless speech and unpretentious ancestry. Dr. Besant tries to drive him from the house. Fired by this opposition and the first real love of her life, Norma gives herself to him. Michael is beset by remorse, and wants to marry her at once. She agrees, of course, but her father interferes again. Michael in his anger blurts out the entire truth, and Dr. Besant, following him from the house,

shoots him, actuated by the blind conviction that in doing so he is defending his daughter's honor.

The last act is then given over to the day of Dr. Besant's trial for murder. His only defense is the unwritten law; his only chance of acquittal depends on the required testimony of his daughter that Michael Jeffery had attempted unsuccessfully to dishonor her. The fact that she is to have a child by Michael is supposed to invalidate her father's case. In her dilemma, and rather than appear on the stand, Norma kills herself—thinking, in her bewilderment and torture of mind, that she will thus save her father's life. The motivation of this scene becomes utterly confused and artificial. The natural sequence to the first two acts would be a much simpler, but no less tragic, dilemma for Norma—the choice between saving her father's life by false testimony that Michael had taken her against her will, or saving the memory of the man she loved by admitting what actually happened. Whether or not her escape, under these conditions, would have meant suicide would have depended entirely on the authors' conception of her character. Either alternative would have meant a life of never-ending tragic memory. Would she, or would she not, have had the courage to face such a life?

I suspect that the authors found suicide a more conclusive final curtain, and that, to this end, they manufactured the round-about and seemingly false notion that only Norma's proved innocence could save her father. This, they may have thought, would give Norma's death

a touch of heroic self-sacrifice. But, like everything artificial in fiction or the theatre, its effect upon the last act of the play is disturbing. The strain of simple emotion is broken. A sense of insincerity at once invades the play.

Any attempt to justify or to elevate suicide in the theatre must inevitably fail, as this fails. It is far better to have the stark brutality of an Ibsen, and permit a suicide, as in "Hedda," to be its own conclusive comment on character. Perhaps it is a poor box-office formula, but it has at least the merit of artistic integrity. For its first two acts, there are few American plays that can approach "Coquette." Its sense of true lyric tragedy breaks down only when the last act stumbles badly in the quagmire of contrivance.

Then, of course, there is "Berkeley Square."

### *Berkeley Square*

"Berkeley Square" is a play built essentially upon withdrawal from realities and upon an effort to escape into the limitless realm of fancy—not in the sense of harmless phantasy, but rather in the pathological sense. For all its apparent toying with the fanciful idea that a man can live in two periods of history at one time, and for all the whimsical comedy ensuing from such an idea, its root inspiration lies deeper, very close in fact to a well recognized form of insanity which begins with preferring a dream world to living truths.

We might describe this play as the meeting of two souls, without regard for time or space, who refuse to

live in the real world about them. One seeks an ideal future, the other yearns for a vanished past, and in their unreal worlds they meet, only to find the anguished tragedy which we call the frustration of a dream. This is indeed a slow sickness of the soul which we encounter every day in its milder forms. There is the plodding clerk who, in his day-dreams, is a master of finance. At first his dreams give him comfort, but soon they make the dull reality seem unbearable. A conflict arises between the wish and the truth. The dream is so satisfying and the reality so hard to bear. He ends by losing his job. No longer efficient. Impractical. These minor tragedies are the hidden terrors of mankind.

But in the story of Peter Standish, we have the hint of a tragedy of major proportions—of the whole life of a soul tied to a dead past, hopelessly in love with memories not even his own, the cruelty of the dream cutting into the lives of those about him. It does not matter whether this was the author's intention or not. The phantasy as written is one of sickness, of mental and spiritual regression—told with loving grace, and inimitable tenderness, but ending in that heart-rending despair which all men find who seek escape in the tragic labyrinth of an enthralling dream.

The last of the four tragedies I mentioned above is significant chiefly through its insignificance. It illustrates a curiously inept and immature phase of American play-writing. I refer to the much praised "Machinal."

*Machinal*

This play sets out to do what some dozen others have attempted—namely, to express through the medium of short episodes the mood and temper of modern life. In its general form and technical accomplishments, it is probably the most successful of the recent expressionistic plays. Where it fails, and fails lamentably, is in the material used.

I assume that the author's intention was to convey the effect of a mechanical age upon modern womanhood. In the case employed, the method is to make a young stenographer marry her employer and eventually murder him, in order to free herself to join a lover. The young woman in question is as full of emotions as she is empty of thought. Either by intention or oversight, Miss Sophie Treadwell, the author of the play, neglected to supply her heroine with anything remotely resembling a reasoning apparatus. The girl tells us in the last episode that she has always been searching for peace. That statement, taken in conjunction with many of the episodes of the play, including symptoms of claustrophobia anent riding in subways, an alternation of affection with violence toward her mother, a definite repulsion for the man she marries, her selection of a lover because he calls her an angel, an emotional outburst which makes her murder her husband—that statement and its accompanying symptoms, as I say, are enough to set her down as a definite psychopathic case afflicted, as the Freudians would

probably say, by a maternal fixation. This means just one thing—that the story has little or nothing to do with the effect of a mechanical age upon the girl in question, and is merely a study in abnormal psychology which might just as well have taken place near a rockbound New England farm as in the turbulent city of New York. In other words, Miss Treadwell has written a play about a psychologically deranged moron. But she has not written a play about the devastation wrought by modern conditions on an otherwise intelligent and strong personality. For this reason, the entire play lacks any special significance as a portrait of the present age.

This, it seems to me, is a matter of primary importance in judging the value of "Machinal" as an effort in the modern theatre. The combination of an Arthur Hopkins production, settings by Robert Edmond Jones, and an acting company of no small distinction, lent a general atmosphere at the time of its presentation which conveyed a misleading surface impression. I am sure that at least half the audience every evening spent much of its time in looking for "significance" in many of the dreary details of this stupid tragedy as an excuse for the baldness of its detail. For it is just this kind of expression of modern life which specifically requires an accumulation of detail in order to explain the turn of events.

To say that this is merely the story of an emotionally neurotic girl of a very low order of intelligence, who murders an objectionably complacent husband because she has fallen in love with a romantic rotter, will prob-

ably shock many ardent apostles of the new art, but it is an absolutely true statement. The girl seems to have various longings for hilltops and free spaces, but it is perfectly evident that if she had been born on a hill farm in New England, she would have been equally bored and restless and would have had similar secret longings for the freedom and gaiety of life in a big city. She would probably have married a banker in a neighboring small town in order to get away from the farm, and would probably have murdered the banker in order to run away with a trapeze artist from the first visiting circus. No matter what environment you placed her in, she would be discontented for the very simple reason that her psychological problem is an internal and not an external one. If she had lived in the middle ages, as the wife of a king, she would have been bored with her stupid consort and have wanted to run off with the first knight errant. Or, conversely, if she had been married to a knight errant, she would have been deeply wounded at his frequent trips away from home and have longed for the peace and security of being the wife of a king. In one sense, this is an admission that Miss Treadwell has picked a fairly universal character—one to be found in all times, in all ages and all conditions, but it is also true that she has picked a most intensely uninteresting universal character, hardly worth writing about in any time, in any age or under any circumstances. By this I do not mean that a psychopathic case could never be made interesting in the theatre. On the contrary, we have in "Hamlet" the

classic psychological case of all time. What makes Hamlet interesting in the usual interpretation is the fact that his emotions are at war with his intellect. The girl in Miss Treadwell's play has no intellect with which her emotions could possibly be at war. She has, so to speak, no inner protagonist. Hers is a story of crushed submission to her own emotions, not a story of struggle, conflict, of final victory or final defeat. She is very nearly an automaton.

Some of the critics have battled heroically to explain just why "Machinal" achieves certain haunting overtones. All I can say is that the text of the play has the one artistic merit of understatement. We happen to be afflicted today with certain audiences which are quite as ready to swim in their emotions as the modern authors themselves. Such audiences are always highly impressed when a distracted heroine exclaims, "I have always been searching—searching—" They seem to feel that, somehow, any one who is deep enough to be constantly searching must have some hidden inner excuse for murder, lust or any other convenient crime. They feel that some beautiful climax has been reached when such a heroine can exclaim, "I have never felt free until the moment I hit him over the head with a bottle!" As a matter of fact, the girl in "Machinal" says no such thing. What she does say is something to the effect that she never felt free and purified until she committed adultery! But the general notion is the same. It means that if somebody is confused within a mental fog, and lacks the will power and

energy to try to pierce the fog, we must extend him the warm and juicy hand of sympathy, and feel that he must have been wronged somehow, somewhere and by some one. I am not denying for a minute that Divine Justice might see the guilt of such a person in a much more merciful light than the law. But I am denying most emphatically that a woman of this sort is material for effective drama, or for a solid and thoughtful presentation of what is evidently Miss Treadwell's intended theme, and that audiences which attempted to find significance in the emotional swirlings of this girl were being quite as absurd as the twenty love-sick maidens in Gilbert and Sullivan's "Patience." In its technical aspects, "Machinal" is something of an accomplishment, but in every other respect it is a sadistic bore, quite meaningless in the sense of throwing any new illumination upon the machine age.

Plays such as "Machinal" and the dramatic version of Theodore Dreiser's "American Tragedy" present a serious obstacle to the progress of the tragic spirit among American playwrights. By a certain timeliness in plot material, they obscure the poverty of their themes and the utter mediocrity of their characters. This gives them a brief following among mental snobs and turns the attention of managers from genuine poetic output to the backwash from the tabloid press. I am confident, however, that the theatre of the coming decade will have less and less room for such maudlin exhibitions. They form merely an interlude between two periods of honest and searching creative effort.

## CHAPTER V

### LAUGHTER FOR TEARS

BEFORE turning to the rather rich harvest of American plays, serious, tender and occasionally cynical, which fall in that ground between comedy and tragedy, I am tempted to recall briefly a few of the vivacious plays which have given some hope that the American stage in its next period will be as versatile and sprightly in comedy as it will be penetrating and lyric in its serious efforts.

#### *The Show-Off*

George Kelly and Philip Barry have given us some of our best comedy, the first in a mood of clever observation and reporting, and the latter in a vein of delicious nonsense with a serious undertone. Kelly's "The Show-Off" will long remain my cherished formula for a comedy that strikes like steel and then salves the wound with a whimsical smile. Kelly can make us laugh uproariously at ourselves—and what is healthier than that? Too many mediocre comedies depend for their success upon creating a definite feeling of superiority in the audience to the characters on the stage. Kelly makes use of this well known trick in the early stages of "The Show-Off"—but before long one is aware of one's own show-off in-



GEORGE KELLY

. . his comedy strikes like steel, and then salves the wound  
with a whimsical smile."



instincts, one squirms (not too painfully) as the mirror is held up, and at last, all resistance being broken, one bursts out uncontrollably as weakness after weakness of one's hidden self is recognized in the benevolent caricature.

*Philip Goes Forth*

Of Kelly's other plays, "Craig's Wife" by its mordant satire and semi-serious mood belongs in another group than the comedies. In "Maggie the Magnificent," Kelly was not at his best, possibly because, as in "Behold, the Bridegroom—," he was not content with brilliant reporting and was reaching vainly for "higher significances." When George Kelly reaches for the stars, he is all too apt to pick up only a stone-cold meteorite. Fortunately, in one of his most recent plays, "Philip Goes Forth," he has turned his aspirations back to earth and written a happy if uninspired comment on that youthful egotism which expresses itself in a desire to run away from practical affairs and "do something significant." In this case, the subject of Kelly's kindly but pointed comment is Philip Eldridge,—son of a Middle-Western manufacturer,—who is sure that he has an inborn genius for writing plays. One can not but suspect that Kelly is gently poking fun at his own none too successful attempts at "significance."

At this point, it is only fair to say that if George Kelly has little or nothing of the poet in him, the real importance, amounting to genius, of his comments is rarely

appreciated. The form in which he presents them is generally so homely and simple and direct that their fundamental shrewdness often passes for mere wit and comedy. The truth is that Kelly does discover universals—though not in the same way that the poet discovers them. The same difference that you find between philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, you find between such playwrights as O'Neill and Kelly. You also find the same difference between such essayists as Chesterton and Belloc. When Chesterton writes history, every page glows with poetic imagination. When Belloc writes history, each page is vigorous with the meaning of concrete events. And so it happens that when O'Neill, at his best, describes characters, you feel them as timeless life forces in struggle, whereas the same people, treated by Kelly, emerge as concrete characters of this day and time, giving vent to their universal foibles in the familiar modes of the present.

There are a few passages in "Philip Goes Forth" when Kelly's comments degenerate into long-winded preachments, and these passages are dull and impeding. But most of the play sparkles with all the brilliancy of Kelly's best early work. In Philip's indignation at his father for not understanding his desire to write plays, in his flight to New York and the odd contacts he makes there in a boarding house run by an ex-theatrical star, in the downright wisdom and charity of that most interesting landlady, in the pale and quivering earnestness of Miss Krail, the faded poetess, in the sombre pride and ultimate sui-

cide of Haines, the "merely good" pianist, in the gas-bag absurdities of Mr. Shronk, Philip's self-appointed mentor, and in the conspiracy of false values created around Philip by the widowed Mrs. Oliver and her lovely daughter, Cynthia—in all these characters and situations, Kelly has drawn a masterly if deceptively mild picture of what it is that makes people want to do what they were never intended to do. A hundred minor touches furnish that combination of plausibility and photographic exactness which makes Kelly, at times, one of the most revealing mirrors we have of contemporary life.

### *Holiday*

Philip Barry is as different from George Kelly as a drawing by Peter Arno is different from a photograph. This comparison is made without the slightest disrespect for photography! The value of photography depends entirely upon the art and wisdom of the photographer in choosing his material and its most eloquent lighting. But Peter Arno, in the very act of distorting his subject, reveals it more clearly. His distortion is his own particular comment. Barry knows, in the same way, how to comment on character with mild distortion and without a trace of preachiness. Of his two most notable comedies, "Holiday" is my favorite, because of its direct simplicity. "Paris Bound" is written as engagingly, but suffers from a confusion of ideas—or, at least, from confusion in their presentation.

As to "Holiday," all one can exclaim is—Salutations to Philip Barry for the one well-nigh perfect comedy of many seasons! If ever there was a justification for the belief that a thoroughly honest play can also be highly diverting and enormously successful from the box-office viewpoint, "Holiday" stands forth as that justification. There is not an off-color line from beginning to end. Yet the comedy is clean, swift and high-spirited. The design is as simple as a landscape, yet the substance of human emotion is there in full measure. The play is firm, true and often stirring without once bordering on sentimentality. And it happens also to have been the most outstanding and even sensational success of its season.

The story, as I have suggested, is straightforward. A young lawyer, Johnny Case, who is on the verge of success, meets Julia Seton at Lake Placid. Julia is the oldest of Edward Seton's three children and very much wedded to her father's views on how the family and the world in general should be run. Her father—otherwise dubbed "Big Business" by his second daughter, Linda—is one of those conservative crustaceans thoroughly accustomed to having his own way in everything. He is somewhat horrified to discover that Johnny Case has no social background, but is slightly mollified by the fact that Johnny has just arranged a successful merger of public utility interests and shows evidences of making a name for himself. Serious trouble begins just after Mr. Seton has agreed to announce the engagement of Julia and Johnny at a

large New Year's party. It then turns out that Johnny has some ideas of his own about relative values in life. Having made a little money of his own and being something of a vagabond at heart, he is rather inclined to take some of his leisure while young. He is fully prepared to stop business for a little while and to resume it only after he and Julia have had a period of leisure and travel. This comes as a bombshell of the maximum calibre in the Seton household—to all, that is, except the forthright and rebellious Linda and her younger brother Ned. The conclusion is, if you wish, obvious. The engagement is broken, and Linda, who has understood the vagabond in Johnny all along, finds her way toward him clear at last, after making doubly sure that Julia no longer cares for him at all.

Now, in many ways, we have here only a repetition of the familiar Cinderella theme. You could tell the story in a way to make it seem almost ridiculous. But Barry does not handle his material that way. In the first place, the Cinderella characteristics in Linda are well concealed by her abrupt, almost boyish mannerisms, her quick wit and apt tongue. She is the dominating figure throughout the play. Then, too, we find a perfection of characterization which convinces us that we are dealing with individuals and not with age-old types. There is authenticity in every detail, and many side touches gives the picture depth and inner meaning. For example, there is the brother, Ned—well on his way to becoming a drunkard

for the simple reason that the whole atmosphere of the stuffy household has jangled his nerves. He needs spiritual fresh air and plenty of it. There are Linda's best friends, Nick and Susan Potter, who, in their unassuming way, have made a real art out of life and extract plenty of amusement and meaning from it by using their sufficient means intelligently. They do not make accumulation of money or power an end in itself. There is also the constant battle of the two sisters, carried on in an undertone and rarely flashing into heat, but forever keeping before us the sterility of wealth as a thing in itself.

I am well aware that through description these things are apt to appear as mere platitudes and moralizations. The point is that Barry, with consummate art, has concealed their obviousness, given them fresh verbal expression, and surrounded them with a sensitive breeze of comedy that takes all the curse off of them. He never strains an emotional point to sentimentality. He never permits fierce denunciation. He lets the audience do its own thinking for the most part, and creates a complete illusion of real human experience. Perhaps the finest touches of all are in his handling of dialogue between the conflicting family groups. Linda and her friends know the worth of nonsense. They never lose the spirit of play—and in that alone lies the secret of the "moral of the play" never becoming tiresome. No American playwright can create such delicious nonsense as Barry at his best, and in this play he has given us the cream of those qualities which made certain parts of "White

Wings" and "In a Garden" enchanting. He has avoided the main fault of those earlier plays, however, in not getting carried away entirely by nonsense and fantasy. He has set about to write a real play and has introduced whimsicality only where it serves a dramatic purpose.

To some people "Holiday" may seem a trifle thin and lacking in the flame of drama. But to my mind its very restraint is what gives it its universality. By keeping true to character it permits the audience to fill in the gaps, and to share in the decisions made by the characters. In brief, "Holiday" is a masterpiece.

### *Paris Bound*

In "Paris Bound," which immediately preceded Holiday, Barry also used just that touch of reality and genuine feeling which his earlier plays lacked, and managed to provide a diverting and occasionally serious evening in the theatre. It is, of course, a confusing play—so confusing, in fact, that one famous newspaper critic virtuously excluded it from competition for the Pulitzer Prize on the ground that it upholds adultery! As a matter of fact, it does nothing of the kind. It simply tries to make clear, in human terms, that a momentary weakness leading to adultery should not be sufficient grounds for immediate divorce. It states very clearly that marriage is a much greater thing than the merely physical relationship of man and wife, and that the companionship of years and the responsibility toward children should not be discarded in an instant.

On the other hand, Barry has opened himself to criticism by his method of handling the subject. The reasons he gives for maintaining the marriage union in spite of infidelity are, essentially, emotional reasons. He is, of course, writing for a mixed audience with highly varied moral standards, and for this reason it may be part of his deliberate intention to seek a common ground for argument. This leads him, nevertheless, into many by-paths and into an explanation of infidelity which undoubtedly seems to make light of the sin of adultery itself. When you try to show that a man may be unfaithful to his wife, under stress of temptation, and at the same time remain deeply in love with her and a devoted husband, you are certainly treading on dangerous ground and it is not at all surprising if at least half of your audience goes away with the idea that you are justifying adultery on the grounds that it is not a very serious offense.

Certainly no one who shares the belief that marriage is a life-long partnership for better or for worse can disagree with Barry's main theme. Understanding and forgiveness have saved thousands of marriages that were headed for the rocks. But it is one thing to argue this as a principle and quite another to argue it merely as a controlling emotion. Barry's wandering hero shows no signs whatever of remorse or of any consciousness that he has been unfair. This is what lends color to the assumption that Barry is upholding adultery. In his anxiety to show that it is not the only sin against married happiness, he

practically flops over to the other side by permitting the inference that it is no offense at all, or at the most, a very slight one.

We might summarize the play by saying that it is a good point very poorly made. It advocates the right course of action, but for the wrong reason. It is somewhat like saying that society should be merciful to a certain thief, not because all justice should be "tempered by mercy," but because the particular thief happened to have stolen from a rich man who wouldn't feel the loss very much. The parallel, in fact, is rather close, because Barry uses the object lesson of a particularly happy and devoted marriage from which the infidelity in question robs only a part of its beauty. There is a strong implication that if the marriage were otherwise less perfect, this particular climax might have been grounds for the inevitable divorce after all.

Aside from this cardinal error in handling the theme, the play is entertainingly written as to dialogue and situation, and the characters are quite the most real that Barry had at that time built up. It is rather too bad that he did so much good playwriting in a mood of confused moral values—for, whatever one's views might be on divorce, Barry does not establish his case on clear enough grounds to leave one with that sense of a sharp issue which it is the task of such comedy-dramas to create. Reverting to the familiar matter of the theme of a play, it should not only ask a question but should answer that question unmistakably. Half an answer is mere dramatic evasion.

*As Husbands Go*

Another well written comedy with a touch of the same central difficulty and confusion is Rachel Crothers' "As Husbands Go." In four plays out of five (as, notably, in "Expressing Willie") Miss Crothers is apt to carry on some pleasantly subtle propaganda against the more disturbing fads and habits of the day. As its subtlety is mixed with capacious humor, considerable charity and much human warmth, the final result is less like preaching than most such efforts and much more like the unobtrusive force of quiet and persistent example. Her characters are seldom all black or all white, and are apt to be delicately and richly colored in something stronger than pastel shades. "As Husbands Go," although clothed in the trappings of sophisticated comedy, has a distinctly serious undertone. Its one knotty problem is settled more along lines of good sportsmanship and expediency than on solid principle (whence the similarity to "Paris Bound"), yet, as a few people are beginning to realize faintly, good sportsmanship itself descends from days when principles governed men's lives, and expediency, when it is the least bit wise, generally traces to the same origins. It often happens, then, that the sportsmanlike and wisely expedient handling of a situation brings about the same result as action based on firmer and clearer grounds. This is the case in Rachel Crothers' handling of Lucille Lingard's problem—the wife who falls in love during a trip abroad and returns to a devoted husband who, "as husbands go,"

is one of the best and wisest and most thoughtful to be found in many wide acres.

After a prologue in Paris, where Lucille and her portly sister-in-law, Emmie, both lose their heads a bit, the play gets fully under way when we find Charles Lingard waiting for his wife's return. With her customary skill, Miss Crothers introduces a few important minor characters—such as Charles's little orphaned nephew who has come to live with him during the summer, Emmie Sykes's daughter, Peggy, and her quietly astute though giraffe-like fiancé, Jake Cannon. Miss Crothers' minor characters are not always necessary to the plots of her plays, but she always uses them to such deft advantage in revealing facets of her main characters that they slip into place with ease, simplicity and rich human value. Long before the moment when Emmie and Lucille enter the room, one has a complete and fully rounded picture of Charles Lingard—enough, perhaps, to make the end of the play apparent, yet also enough to make its working out in human terms a matter of real and sympathetic interest.

The way in which Lucille loses the courage to tell Charles what has happened, the way in which her indecision is brought to a climax by the sudden appearance on the scene of her Paris infatuation, Ronald Derbyshire himself, the awkward efforts of Emmie Sykes to cover up the embarrassments of the moment, complicated by the presence of her own infatuation, Hippolitus, and the protests of her daughter, Peggy, and, finally, the way in which Charles Lingard senses the true situation and

handles it from thenceforth; all this forms the plot material of an exceedingly well balanced and skilfully constructed play. Ronald, after his own fashion, is anxious to be aboveboard, having made Lucille promise to tell her husband the truth at once, and discovers a problem of his own after a day of fishing with Lingard. The scene that evening between the two men is one of the most delightfully human bits on any stage these many seasons. The ending of the play, after Ronald has packed up his things and departed, is also far above the ordinary level of comedy-drama, especially in what it leaves unsaid and merely implied. All in all, I do not see how Miss Crothers could resist paraphrasing Barrie's title, and calling her play "What Some Husbands Know."

As modern plays go—not to mention husbands—this one has many exceptional qualities, not the least of which is that its characters all have, at bottom, and when sufficiently probed, some trace of honor and decent instinct. Compared to the utter caddishness of the doctor in Philip Barry's "Tomorrow and Tomorrow," even Ronald Derbyshire is a man of worth. There is just enough similarity in underlying theme between these two plays to make Miss Crothers' story the best possible indictment of Barry's spurious "romance."

The comedy output of American playwrights is so generous that any process of selection becomes, in the end, unfair through its omissions. One remembers easily and gratefully such bits as Marc Connelly's "The Wisdom Tooth," Martin Flavin's "Broken Dishes," several of the

almost too self-consciously "clean" plays for which John Golden has served as producer-in-chief, and many of Frank Craven's gay and harmless episodes of fighting spirit beneath a timid mask. A list of comedies likely to be revived often in little theatres would include, of course, Cohan's "The Baby Cyclone," also his "Song and Dance Man," and Barry Connors' racy little Cinderella play, "The Patsy" and that very fine Jewish character study "Kibitzer" in which Edward G. Robinson not only created as actor a part of Molièresque proportions, but as author collaborated in the writing. Then, too, there have been the topical comedies, such as the prize-fighter farce, "Is Zat So?". But I suspect that, aside from the ever-recurrent "sophisticated" comedies which conduct an annual race in exceeding the limits of good taste in theme and plot, it will be the comedies characterized by really distinguished writing which will have the most enduring influence in shaping the true style of American humor over the coming years. Barry, Kelly, Miss Crothers, occasionally Sidney Howard, S. N. Behrman, Benn Levy and Robert Sherwood are certainly among the leaders in plays edged by brilliancy and wit as well as by a mere sense of fun and comic situation. Specifically, Sherwood's "Road to Rome"—for all that I fail to admire its theme—Behrman's "The Second Man," and Levy's "Art and Mrs. Bottle" seem to stand out as further examples of a comedy style peculiarly American in feeling. Also—though a play as undistinguished as an egg sandwich—any glance at American comedy which failed to give honest appraisal

to Anne Nichol's "Abie's Irish Rose" would be missing half of the downright inwardness of American audiences. Audiences, as well as playwrights, help to direct the course of the stage!

### *The Road to Rome*

When Robert Emmet Sherwood, through "The Road to Rome," entered the lists of those who joust for an idea under the armor of antiquity, he set one style of comedy writing as clearly as John Erskine set a style of fiction in "The Private Life of Helen of Troy."

"The Road to Rome," which is supposed to be all about Hannibal and his reason for never entering Rome, after coming within three miles of its gates, has about as much to do with Hannibal as cigarettes have to do with the smoking habits of the old Egyptians. Mr. Sherwood has a doctrine to preach and disguises it flimsily in the trappings of a period which every stump orator has likened to our own for the last twenty years. As Rome went, so America is going. That is his none too original thesis. As for the method of telling, he has taken some pages from John Erskine and a few from Shaw and a few more from "What Price Glory," so that, like the milk in the overcrowded ice-chest, the play has many reminiscent odors as well as its own proper scent.

The story of the play has it that Amytis, the Athenian wife of Fabius Maximus, went forth from Rome, like a not very exalted Judith, to find out what manner of man was this invading Hannibal, and to convince him of the

utter futility of life in general and of the capture of Rome in particular. That she succeeds may be attributed by some to the wisdom of her arguments over the breakfast table, but if the very frank situation in the play indicates anything in particular, her success springs from a decidedly more primitive influence. The wig of cleverness which, when it conceals the baldness of misdoings, our critics call "sophistication," hangs over the play at times. But it is that kind of cleverness which begins to pall after the first act, simply because it follows an obvious formula. You know exactly what to expect as each new situation arises, and hence have ample time to appraise what is really being done and said.

Part of the story is legitimate satire, in which Rome, Carthage and Athens, speaking through Fabius, Hannibal and Amytis, express the eternal conflict between inflated civilization, heroic barbarism, and æsthetic mentality. America, Russia and Spain, or perhaps France, might represent the same conflict today. Before 1914, it might have been expressed by England, Germany, and either Italy or Austria. Or you could express it in individual terms by the business man, the soldier, and the artist. To this extent, the play has a pleasingly universal flavor, pointed by its use of modern colloquial dialogue. Civilization has become smug. It has ceased to think. Hence its codes no longer represent intelligent conviction, but simply sheepish acceptance. This does not mean that the codes are wrong, but merely that men have forgotten why they are right—a stupid faith without the support

of reason or the excitement of rediscovery. Barbarism also has its instinctive codes, but blind ones, codes never yet thought out, and adopted through the pressure of active life and stern necessity. Thus Hannibal seeks further conquest for its own sake, without quite knowing why, whereas Rome, at the other extreme, seeks it through habit. It is the artist and philosopher who can sit back and give to the actions of the other two a careful and astute analysis. And the artist has them at his mercy because they are, or have become, inarticulate whereas his own agile mind can spin sophistries as well as truth.

Thus you will find both wisdom and folly in the words of Amytis, a passionate revolt against organized stupidity and all the confusion which revolt brings in its early stages. The real trouble with the play lies in the fact that Sherwood has made Amytis his spokeswoman, and that he, as the editor of "Life," hardly represents the Athenian spirit at its most mature point. The sophisticates love to call themselves "adult," but more often they stand for the awakening curiosity of a precocious child. Amytis is no goddess of Athenian wisdom. She says many uncannily wise things (what bright child does not?) but she does many exceedingly infantile things.

Thus the second part of the play, with its bedroom comedy story, is merely another tale of the bored wife seeking excitement in a neighboring house. That she "gets away with it," up to the last curtain, simply indicates the generally childish mentality to which the play keys itself in its many weaker moments. It is about as true to life

as the child's fantasy that once he has run away from home, all will be freedom and joy. Unfortunately, the audiences of today are not far wiser than the playwright, so that "The Road to Rome," in its total impression, becomes little more than a vicarious means of jumping the traces. You are meant to sympathize with Amytis, who is little better than a flapper wife in search of the cheap thrill of infidelity. That is the bald truth beneath the wig of sophistication. The satire against militarism almost disappears in the artificial glamor thrown about infidelity triumphant.

Amytis is neither the wife of farce comedy, nor the embodiment of an idea, though the author tries to make her each in turn. The only thoroughly interesting characterization is Hannibal. Until the dismal doldrums of the last half of the last act, he brings to the play its one note of sincerity—the romantic adventurer in the breast of a soldier. The play, except for its clever satire, is utterly at odds with human experience and becomes at times distressingly like a cheap bid for salacious success.

### *The Second Man*

A less distinctive, but more distinguished comedy, by virtue of its character study, and one which promises more for the permanent values of the American theatre is S. N. Behrman's "The Second Man." To the Theatre Guild goes the credit for fostering Mr. Behrman's talent at a crucial moment of his career—the outset.

In this play, the wealthy widow, Mrs. Kendall Frayne,

is in love with the precariously successful novelist, Clark Storey, and the two might be quite happily wedded were it not for the fact that Monica Grey is also in love with Storey and will pay little or no attention to Storey's best friend, Austin Lowe. Lowe, be it added, is a rising but inarticulate young scientist, born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Monica Grey is poor. But she would rather face comparative poverty with Storey than marry Lowe, whom she regards much as one might the binomial theorem—with cautious respect.

Even so, these four lives might not cross each other seriously were Storey a single-track and simple soul. Unfortunately, he has a "second man" hiding beneath his debonair exterior. These two men, one cynical, worldly, and rather decisive, the other romantic, childish, and tenderly poetic, collide frequently as the play progresses. The second man loves Monica Grey, while the first reminds him that Monica should marry Austin, that in the end she will be far happier with that supremely worthy young man than with either the first or second Storey. The first Storey knows that he should marry Mrs. Frayne because she can give him money, comfort, companionship. His regard for her may even change to a love capable of reciprocating her own.

Thus it is that the four lives are interwoven, inextricably, it would seem at times. With only these four characters, the play wanders through an evening, sometimes hinting at tragedy, emerging more frequently into keen and biting comedy, and even approaching for a

few moments the thin air of farce. It is an exceedingly well written play, holding fast to very real emotions, crackling with brilliant dialogue, and searching into certain paradoxes of human nature which rarely receive adequate treatment in anything less than tragedy. Occasionally there is a cheap line for the gallery (or is it the orchestra these days that likes to hear a young girl get flippantly smart about throwing away her virtue?) but the prevailing note is sincere if unblushingly frank.

Unfortunately one must use that qualifying word "prevailing." Every now and then you settle down in the theatre conscious of a keen and invigorating artistry in the play, wondering if here, at last, is a man who can write fine comedy without resorting to tricks. As the dialogue rolls along, your elation increases. You have a sense of discovery. This man is a find! Then there is a subtle break in the rhythm. You almost hear the actors taking breath. They seem to become self-conscious before your eyes. You wonder what has happened. And then the secret is out! The very next line is a bit of insincere rubbish. The actors, with their instant intuition, know it. It is the kind of line that might be put in at the request of a manager who tells the playwright, "Say, boy, you need a laugh here. Why not give 'em something hot?" It is a trick line, whose cheapness glares at you all the more because of the very excellence of all that has gone before—a line which a real artist would never permit, because it comes from ulterior purpose and not from character. Then you settle back to enjoy the rest of the

play, but your first eagerness has gone. This near-artist has dulled the edge of his own weapon. Mr. Behrman has done just that in "The Second Man."

But this can not alter the fact that in Clark Storey, Mr. Behrman has created a remarkably fine stage character. The author's intention is evidently to make the cynic in Storey the second personality. But like so many intentions it miscarries in the execution. As we see Storey throughout most of the play, it is the cynic who predominates, who has become the outer shell of the man. It is his original and finer character that has been shoved back into second place, to break forth only at intervals and under the stress of genuine emotion. A good actor can make this man acutely interesting and alive, a self-tortured soul, never quite the artist, never quite the cold-blooded man of the world, lovable because of his inner suffering, admirable because of the finer instincts which always triumph in a crisis.

Where this first produced play of Behrman's promises most for future American comedy is in its emphasis on character rather than on mere plot situation, and on types of character distinctly above the level of the comic strip.

### *Art and Mrs. Bottle*

Benn W. Levy is another author who combines versatility with understanding, wit and no small measure of an unexpected tenderness. His phantasy, "Mrs. Moonlight," obviously does not come under the grouping of

comedies, but in "Art and Mrs. Bottle" he has contrived an unusually adept method of propaganda in the comedy spirit. In this case, Levy sincerely and aggressively (though not on the solidest of grounds) wages war against the slogan, "art for art's sake." As an experiment in form, the play is unusually interesting.

On the whole, Mr. Levy proves himself a good strategist. For at least half of the play, it appears that the romantic Mrs. Bottle has returned to her husband (an exemplary sanitary engineer) for the express purpose of encouraging her long neglected children to follow her own life's example. That example, be it said, is not precisely perfumed with innocence nor softened by domesticity. In fact, Mrs. Bottle left her husband shortly after the birth of their second child (now a grown young man) to wander around the world with an artist of somewhat promiscuous taste. This artist finally dumped her on the streets of Paris, but Celia Bottle preferred continuing her career to returning to her sanitary engineer. Whereupon she became the companion of an antique Russian prince.

As the play opens, we find the Bottle progeny taking up quite seriously with art—Michael Bottle as an embryo painter of considerable talent, and Judy Bottle as a less good painter with a determination to be an inspiration to some one else. Judy, in fact, is about ready to leave home and follow her mother's example—albeit unwittingly, since she and her brother have been brought up

in the belief that their mother is dead. The maternal ghost, however, soon appears on the scene in most solid form, preceded by a telegram.

Celia Bottle is, of course, exceedingly attractive and is far more intelligent than her son, daughter or husband. Her Russian prince, it seems, is dead—which fact she finds ample reason for returning home and picking up the threads dropped twenty years earlier. For a woman of her quick wit and intuition, the job is not a hard one, and in a very short space of time Celia knows both her children much better than her astonished husband ever could and considerably better than they know themselves. She also discovers, to her concerned surprise, that the artist with whom her daughter is planning to share existence is none other than the artist who left Celia herself so shamelessly in Paris years earlier. Yet, in spite of these developments, one is still led to believe that Mrs. Bottle is about to encourage her children to break all bonds for the sake of “living a full life.”

This makes the actual turn of the play all the more piquant and startling. For it soon develops that Celia Bottle, though far from being a burned-out wreck, has had quite enough of life and art. Also enough of artists. She is not afflicted with any species of moral remorse. On the contrary, principles, as such, seem to play no part whatever in her life. She is a thoroughgoing pragmatist. Whatever works satisfactorily is good. What fails to work is bad. Hence, her diversions with the artist in early youth, and her companionship with the decrepit prince

later on having failed to yield any large measure of satisfaction, Celia has come to the conclusion that sanitary engineering is a noble and useful profession, that so-called "creative art" is the mere passive mirroring of forces playing about the unhappy artist and that it is better to live and work for the sake of good plumbing than to produce a masterpiece. With these notions solidly planted in her pretty head, she sets about to break up her daughter's affair with the artist, to make a plumber rather than a painter out of her son, and to make her astonished husband more than ready to welcome her back to the home that pipes built.

Because the play is well written, it serves as unusually good propaganda for Mr. Levy's main idea. Quite obviously, however, it is shot through with enough shallow thinking to make it interesting solely as a successful dramatic form. Pragmatic morals may end by arriving at about the same conclusions as morals based on genuine standards. But the pragmatic mind is never interesting in itself. It always reminds one of a reasonably intelligent small dog who finds after long experience the way to avoid being run over and the way to beg food successfully. The only trouble is that the most intelligent of small dogs is infinitely less intelligent than the stupidest small boy, and hence infinitely less interesting. The real pragmatist lacks enough imagination to form any intelligent judgments in advance of experience. And by the same token the pragmatist lacks enough balance to find the truth between extremes. Celia Bottle's early career is

no more absurd than the extreme of her conversion to the anti-art crusade. She attacks "art for art's sake" only to fall into the opposite absurdity of advocating plumbing for plumbing's sake!

In fact, the best part about the theme of this particular play is the lesson it furnishes, quite unconsciously, in the stupidity of doing anything temporal for its own sake. That rather important philosophy by which many men have become great, and by which a few have become saints—namely, that all things temporal should be used for an end greater than themselves—has no place in the scheme of "Art and Mrs. Bottle." The notion that art may be as useful as good wash basins in enriching men's lives never enters Celia Bottle's reformed head.

*Abie's Irish Rose—and the G.A.P.*

And now—for Abie's Irish Rose and the G.A.P., that sadly maligned "great American public," that furnisher of box-office sinews and ultimate appreciation of all theatrical effort! I did not see "Abie" until it had been running five years. I realized that, for generations to come, American managers would measure the mind of the public by the astonishing run of this play. I was swollen with indignation and prejudice. And now comes the confession—a final breach of faith, perhaps, with all the art theatres and theatrical highbrows of this land, but none the less a true confession. I am one of the G.A.P. I thoroughly enjoyed "Abie." Disagreed with it, but enjoyed it fully, laughed just where I was expected to laugh,

swallowed hard when everyone around me was doing the same, met the sedate vice-president of a big bank between the acts and found he was mentally keeping me company, sat through to the last minute and was perfectly content that I had paid for my seat and had never thought to ask for "press courtesies." And ever since, in that naïve way we have of making excuses for ourselves, I have been looking about for evidence that the G.A.P. is not so unsound, after all, in its silent judgment on plays.

In the first place (and please do not smile too broadly, nor with too much superiority!), "Abie" meets all the requirements of Aristotle and Professor Baker as to theme, plot, structure, and characterization! You may not agree with its main theme, that religious belief is mere sectarianism and plays little or no part as a foundation for married happiness. But in a country where less than half the population acknowledges any special religious belief, the theme has its wide-spread appeal. We can accept that as a fact without agreeing with it in our hearts. The secondary theme, of young love opposed by parents, has at least the distinguished precedent of "Romeo and Juliet." The plot has constant suspense. Action never lags. Characterization becomes quite individual—only occasionally relying on type. The comedy of line is a rather low and obvious form, but quite superior to many pretentious dinner-table witticisms one must sit through. Above all, Abie stands for sincere playwriting in that the author does not reside in Olympian heights above her characters. She is obviously fond of them. They are people of real feel-

ing, even if simple feeling. They never cry for the amusement of the audience; they never make love for the purpose of being laughed at. The situations may be laughable, but rarely the people in them. And if the Cohans seem to be lifted from the comic strip and disprove what I have said, remember that Abie and Rosemary are glad enough to see them on a lonely Christmas eve.

If I may be allowed a further word of justification, personal and also in behalf of the G.A.P., is it quite fair to say that "Abie" is a cheap and vulgar show simply because it demands little mental effort from the audience? It seems to me I have heard of many an erudite bridge party in the country ending up with a trip to a quick-lunch counter for a "hamburger" sandwich and coffee, or, lacking the quick-lunch, with a raid on the ice-box. This, too, following an elaborate dinner in the early evening served to an epicure's taste! After all, the theatre is there to draw entertainment from life—not merely from one plane of life, but from anything that is true and sincere, tragic or amusing, riotous or reverent, tender or exuberant. If we must lament with Hamlet, we must also tap the ale with Falstaff, or leap from Phedre to Scapin. It was the same genius who wrote "Macbeth" and "Twelfth Night." If Ibsen plays are all in one mould, perhaps it is because Ibsen was less of a genius than his worshippers believe. One admires Shaw the more for holding "Pygmalion" in one hand and "Saint Joan" in the other. The theatre is a place for entertainment—but not all of one kind.

One might grow gloomy over the G.A.P., particularly the New York G.A.P., were it not for the typical fact that "Abie's" fifth season also happened to celebrate the second year of "The Dybbuk," the emergence of "Capon-sacchi," the astounding success of "Cradle Song," a revival of "The Wild Duck," and the prompt failure of some twenty or more plays which did not have what the maligned "Abie" has—theme, plot, structure, characterization, honest feeling, and broad humor. Perhaps the G.A.P. knows its Aristotle after all!

## CHAPTER VI

### THE ART OF FOG LIFTING

THE French once used a slang expression—perhaps they still use it—to describe the type of mind that cuts its way through difficulties and obstacles. They called a man with these qualities a “*débrouillard*,” for which the nearest free translation is “a fog lifter.” Several of our American dramatists have achieved this quality without in the least sacrificing their best instincts as poets and honest craftsmen. Instead of harping forever on themes of frustration or mordant irony, they have managed, without forcing a “happy ending,” to give their plays a feeling of emergence from the fogs and confusions of life. To do this without sentimentality, and above all to do it with integrity, is a difficult art. It is much easier, when faced by a complex dramatic situation, to leave the answer to one’s theme question completely in the fog. This is the way of the lazy brain. It is often as hard to find a constructive and triumphant solution for the difficulties of one’s created characters as for the intimate problems of one’s own life. For this reason, I feel that fog lifting is quite as much of a fine art in plays that escape tragedy as in lyric tragedy itself.

Just as in tragedy, however, we often find the same playwright creating both types of drama. In one mood, the playwright may carry his people through to something fine and illuminating. In another mood, he may lead them only to an impasse. I speak of "moods" only in the popular sense, of course, since what actually happens in most cases is that the author, creating his characters as reflections of his own semi-conscious problems, finds himself able to solve some of these problems and completely baffled by others. His characters collectively can seldom be capable of greater things than his own complex personal character. The true artist is the "voice of a tumult." He has within him the potentialities of all the characters he creates. They are "sides of himself," and express equally his powers and limitations, his dreams and his disillusionments, his triumphs and his failures. He may, at the moment of writing, feel that his characters are purely objective, but the very theme he selects to write about exhibits his strong personal interest in the problem that theme raises. He chooses certain characters because, in his own estimation, those characters best illustrate the working out of his theme. Directly or indirectly, then, the artist and his characters are one. When they surmount a given obstacle, it is because the artist himself is capable of surmounting that same obstacle, or its moral equivalent. The "mood" of the artist, then, when clearly understood, is nothing less than the resultant of the moral tumult within him at the particular stage of life he has reached at the time of writing a particular play. One year

he may enjoy that mystical "inner peace" which enables him to resolve difficulties for his characters with clarity, understanding and broad sympathies. A year later, because of some inner confusion experienced, or because of some moral issue unsettled in his own life, he might be utterly incapable of forging through the very same obstacles which, a year earlier, appeared slight. Or, again, at one and the same time, one set of difficulties may be met easily and another set may appear insuperable. A sex problem may resolve itself clearly, whereas a problem of pride, or possessiveness or avarice may seem to present no outlet.

I have made this slight digression into the "moods" of the artist for the very good reason that we have to be as charitable about them as about the most obvious faults of our own and of our neighbors. We can not, in all fairness, place any one playwright in the "mob of the frustrated" unless all of his plays consistently show the same distemper. Ibsen is a fair example of an artist to whom nearly every problem loomed like some inaccessible mountain peak. His "Woman from the Sea" is one of the few plays in which he does not end with a cry of pain and despair, or at least with a growl of negative protest.

The post-war American theatre has been rather fortunate in the number of its playwrights who have, at least on occasions, proved their ability as "fog lifters." Sidney Howard, Susan Glaspell, Dana Burnett, Philip Barry, Marc Connelly, Edward Knoblock, Julia Peterkin and Lynn Riggs are among the many who have con-

tributed notably in plays of emerging character and strength.

*They Knew What They Wanted*

Because of my objections to Sidney Howard's tragedy, "Lucky Sam McCarver," I am particularly eager to recall the splendid fire of his much earlier play, "They Knew What They Wanted." This play will probably have a long and useful life in repertory and little theatre productions, in spite of defective characterization in one important place and certain little absurdities which indicate that Mr. Howard's extensive experiences as journalist and special reporter had left him with a few blind spots in observation. In the technical sense, the play is a comedy, but one can not escape its feeling of finely serious drama. It tells the story of Tony, an old and wealthy Italian fruit grower of California, who courts, by correspondence, a waitress, Amy, whom he has seen once in a San Francisco restaurant. Instead of sending her his own photograph, he sends her one of his chief farm hand, Joe, an "I.W.W." fanatic of decidedly loose moral habits. When Amy arrives on her wedding day, she at first mistakes Joe for her intended husband, and then discovers her mistake when Tony is brought in with two broken legs as the result of an automobile smash-up.

After a considerable struggle, between continued poverty as a memory, and a home with an aged husband as a possible future, Amy decides to go through with her bargain. But her resentment runs deep, and on the wed-

ding night itself, she yields with only slight reluctance to Joe's advances. Three months later, when she finds she is to have a child by Joe, she bravely confesses everything to Tony—a confession that is made all the more ironic by the fact that she had yielded to Joe only once in a moment of mental turmoil, and by the further fact that she has since come to love Tony sincerely. The scene of this confession is one of the best pieces of dramatic writing I have seen in many years, ending, as it does, in a triumph for Tony's greatness of heart and depth of understanding. He takes the full blame on himself for his initial deception in sending the wrong photograph, and discovers and accepts at the same time the sincerity of the new love which Amy has for him.

Now it is quite understandable, that, for dramatic effect, Mr. Howard should have Amy commit her one transgression on the wedding night itself. Yet I can not but feel that this weakens the characterization greatly. In every other respect, Amy is essentially a strong character—in her decision to go ahead with her bargain in spite of the deception, in her refusal to practise any subterfuge about her child, or to do away with it, in the fine contempt she discovers for Joe the moment her confused resentment has passed, in the flinty courage with which she makes her confession, expecting it to mean the wrecking of her life and her chance for a home, and feeling deeply the tragedy it holds for Tony. It seems hardly credible that a woman of this type would succumb so rapidly and with

such trivial cause to the dark persuasions of Joe. This creates a serious weakness in a play that is otherwise a powerful crescendo in the character development of two people whose lives, for a time, seem headed toward disaster and tragedy.

The other weakness lies in the character of the priest, Father McKee, to whose kindly philosophy Tony and Amy owe much of their essential strength. First of all—and as a trivial detail of observation—a rough and ready parish priest of Father McKee's type is not apt to worry about "not having written his sermon" by a Thursday evening! The other point is more important. Mr. Howard makes Father McKee warn Tony in the first act that marriage with a non-Catholic is "practically the same as living in sin," even when the marriage ceremony is performed by a Catholic priest. This is so grotesque a misrepresentation of the well known Catholic position that it smacks of the desire to write an amusing line rather than of honest character study. In all its main outlines, however, this play must remain one of the memorable contributions to that theatre in which strong characters battle through to important human victories.

### *Four Walls*

A rather more subtle type of victory is implied in Dana Burnett's "Four Walls," a play which should not drop into the limbo of forgotten things. As the story of an ex-convict's battle for inner freedom, it has many splendid

overtones, although, due to George Abbott's collaboration in the writing, it is distressingly like two plays instead of one.

I say "distressingly" because the two plays have not been fused. Each breaks in on the other, with the result that many moments of introspective beauty are lost through the resounding crash of tense melodrama, while the melodrama, in its turn, is suspended for philosophy. This is all the more unfortunate because either play, by itself, would merit distinguished attention, and a genuinely successful fusion of the two might have produced a masterpiece.

Benny Horowitz, former leader of an East Side gang, returns from five years "up the river" imbued with a passion for freedom. He has discovered that prison walls are not half so confining as the walls of environment, friendships, passions or crime. He is determined to be the one free man on earth. After accidentally killing a man in a fight, and in spite of the protection of a successful alibi, he finally discovers that "truth alone can set him free," and delivers himself up once more to the police. This, I take it, is the original Burnett theme. The Abbott play is a straight melodrama of the reformed crook, depending in no detail on Benny's peculiar philosophy for its movement. That is why there is no fusion. If the plot—always excepting the final curtain—turned in some way on Benny's distinctive reactions to men and events, the two ideas would connect and form a unified whole. Instead, Benny's thoughts and inner struggles become

largely verbiage. They burst forth suddenly and for no apparent reason. And they build to no dramatic conclusion until the very end, when Benny gives himself up rather than be obligated for life to the possessive young girl who has lied to give him his alibi.

It might have helped greatly if the authors had developed more fully the character of this girl. In her coarse way, she has something of the eternal empress in her—the desire to cleave to the man of power, the ruler, and through him to lead, herself. This is implied, but too briefly. Her physical attraction to Benny is overplayed at the expense of the more interesting theme. As things stand, she is not the dramatic protagonist. Her mind never meets and clashes with Benny's, so that his final protest against her possessiveness seems to be chanted in a vacuum. She turns into a mere blackmailer instead of the symbol of the domineering woman.

### *Hotel Universe*

Another play which deserves more enduring recognition than anything promised to it by contemporary press criticisms is Philip Barry's "Hotel Universe." In its essence, it is unquestionably one of the finest plays Barry has had produced so far.

The play is in one long act without intermission. On this account, the objections made by many critics to certain details of play structure, to the awkward handling of certain scenes and to one or two incongruous episodes were perhaps well taken. The play lacks craftsmanship

—as if it had been poured out in a torrent. But its central idea is so simple, so obvious and so coherent that one is amazed at any accusation of vagueness and confusion.

Barry has simply taken the old thought that we are often chained to the past, and so prevented from forging ahead, by the fact that our memory of the past is largely illusion, and that if we can once re-live the past in all its stark truth, we recover our faith in the present. In other words, a daughter may remember her dead father as one of the most entertaining and fascinating men on earth, forgetting that he was a worthless drunkard and an impossible egotist. Let some shock or accident bring back the full truth to her mind, and she is at once freed. We are always imagining the superior beauties of the past and neglecting the precious instants of the here and now. Barry has simply thrown together a group of people, each one of whom is suffering from this spell of an imagined past, and for that reason discontented or disconsolate—even to the point of intended suicide. Through the device of a mysterious old man, the father of one of the group, Barry has arranged to have a spell cast over all of these discontents through which each one re-lives the true past and so finds freedom and happiness and a return of lost faith. It is not a highly subtle idea, nor is it, as several critics hinted, a relic of Freudian psychology. It is pretty much ordinary common sense, applied with a fanciful touch, some highly engaging dialogue, and an intensity of hidden feeling which occasionally leads Barry astray in his technique. It is, if one may be permitted to use the

word these days, a deeply religious play in the sense that true religion demands an acceptance of present reality as one basis of stalwart faith. Tender and mistaken illusions of the past only create a conflict in the present which, sooner or later, attacks the roots of faith, hope and love.

Plays of this sort are, of course, peculiarly difficult to write in a way that maintains complete theatrical illusion. Only such rare masterpieces as Ansky's "The Dybbuk" are able to lift you from the plane of gross realism to a plane where the supernatural or the extraordinary seems plausible. In many of his scenes on the veranda of an old house overlooking the Mediterranean, Barry has effected this sense of the plausible with considerable skill. But he has failed just often enough to account, in some measure, for the confusion the play has created in many minds. In spite of this, it is a work of real distinction which probes to the very root of many of our present-day confusions and distortions of values. If Barry has the courage to write more plays of this sincerity and restrained passion, he can go far toward obliterating the memory of his unfortunate "Tomorrow and Tomorrow."

### *Alison's House*

In Susan Glaspell, we have an artist who seems destined to win more critical applause as a novelist than as a playwright. It is quite true that her dramatic work is uneven, that, at times, her ideas seem to falter and grow a bit confused, and that her sense of theatrical timing is not perfect. But it is a serious mistake to minimize the value of

her plays as drama. In "Inheritors" and even more in "Alison's House" she has achieved a quality in native American terms and feeling which can only be compared to the more luminous writings of Chekhov.

Of "Alison's House" this much should be said at once—that in producing it, Eva Le Gallienne once more placed the whole American theatre in her debt. When this play was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for the year, a storm of critical protest at once arose. David Carb, the discerning critic of "Vogue," was one of the very few to grant it instant praise. Possibly there is no space left in the theatre today for quiet beauty, nor for truths which poets understand, but the Pulitzer committee at least had the courage to try to make space for them. That is something to the committee's everlasting credit.

This play (based, so rumor has it, on certain incidents suggested by the life of Emily Dickinson) is rare as a work of art, rare as a search into the sensitive souls of a group of people living somewhat apart from the humdrum world, and rare, above all, for its success in creating, by a hundred small allusions and situations, the portrait of an off-stage character which glows with life and an almost ghostly presence.

Unquestionably, it is Alison Stanhope, the fragile, powerful and tender poetess, the woman who loved and had the strength to deny her love, it is this Alison, eighteen years dead, who lives and moves through every moment of the play as its heroine. Her aging brother, John, her sister Agatha, her nephew Eben and his practical wife,



SUSAN GLASPELL

... found space for self-denial in a modern play—and won the Pulitzer Prize!



and her niece, Elsa, who also loved, but lacked the courage to deny, as Alison had denied—all these characters move before you in the flesh, sensitively portrayed in all their conflicting moods and emotions, remaining always individuals and never regressing into mere types, puzzled, gay, humorous, sad—one of them, Agatha, even dying. But hardly a thought in their lives, hardly an action, would be the same were it not for Alison. Through the heroism of her one great sacrifice, she has projected some living part of her self into the lives of every one of them. Agatha can not bear the thought of leaving the homestead where Alison lived, and is mercifully spared this uprooting by death. Elsa returns after years of wandering to find forgiveness beneath the roof where Alison lived. A tender love affair develops between two young people—first drawn together by Alison's memory. It is only fitting that the play ends in Alison's own room—preserved exactly as she left it—and at a moment of fresh revelation of the true depth of Alison's suffering through the discovery of some unpublished poems which Agatha had guarded jealously to the moment of her death.

There is one period in the play when Miss Glaspell fails, I believe, to think through clearly to the full meaning of the heroic problem she has set for her characters. It is during the tense minutes of the last act when Elsa, pleading that she is not as great as Alison and is unable to deny her own love for a married man, falls back on a rather sentimental feeling that Alison would have understood (which she would have!) and would have wanted

only to have Elsa "happy" (which I am certain is not the truth!). Alison would wisely have looked deeper than emotional happiness to the groundwork for lasting inner peace. She would have been gentle and understanding, but also persuasive. She would not have condoned—for her acquired wisdom was too great. And Elsa, I think, knew Alison too well to say what Miss Glaspell has her say at such a time.

This is the only important weakness, however, in the cumulative force and beauty of a play which depends less on narrated incident than on character and delicate shadings of emotion. One returns with quickened feelings of gratitude to that central idea—overlooked in so many of the critical attacks—an idea which is much more than the mere influence of the dead poetess on her living family. It is the particular quality of that influence and its particular source—Alison's self-denial—which rings a challenge to nine-tenths of modern thinking. It is an old idea, and a mystic one, that "as we die to ourselves we live to a greater life." Granted that it is not a popular idea today, it still has on its side the greatest poets since history began. It rips to pieces the smug egotism of today—all the Narcissistic self-worship and indulgence, and all the unchained eroticism which modern life has set up as its all too easily achieved ideal.

At all events, whether one agrees with the Pulitzer judges or not, Miss Le Gallienne and her entire Civic Repertory company, who brought "Alison's House" so tenderly and devotedly to life, should come in for heart-

felt congratulations. No other New York manager would have had the courage to produce the play.

*Green Grow the Lilacs*

Lynn Riggs' dramatic efforts have caught an entirely different side of American feeling from the quiet luminosity of character pervading Miss Glaspell's works. "Green Grow the Lilacs" is by far the best of the Riggs plays produced so far. Its opening at the Guild Theatre in New York gave good cause for some excitement in the theatrical season. Not since the tender, if somewhat exaggerated, quaintness of Marc Connelly's "The Green Pastures" rose upon the Broadway horizon, had anything appeared with an equal measure of ruddy simplicity, native salt and the honest illusion of American soil. The spluttering of blasphemies, on the usual grounds of "realism," is inexcusable—all the more so because the dialogue has a sharp tang of its own, which carries all the necessary illusion of hard-fistedness. The simple fact that authors will use blasphemy "for realism" when they sensitively refrain from many other blunt Saxon words quite as commonly used indicates the fundamental insincerity of the current verbal epidemic. With this reservation out of the way, there is no question that in all its broad outlines, Mr. Riggs' play was the only logical candidate, aside from "Alison's House," for that season's Pulitzer Prize. It is a sturdy product of the fast-vanishing American scene.

Because of the instant movie associations, one almost hesitates to say that the scene is laid in Indian Territory

(now part of Oklahoma) in the first year of this century. It is no movie scenario, however, that Mr. Riggs has written, but a very living and richly colored picture of frontier farm life, in which cowboys are beginning to think of hitching horses to a plow and cutting deep furrows in the soil, in which the United States and its federal government still represent almost a "foreign" country, and into which neither automobiles nor radios nor modern sales methods have yet penetrated. It is a play which would be vastly stupid if it did not live, and live mightily, in warm-blooded characters and rough-spoken simplicity. It is the kind of play to which you would like to take a foreign visitor, in order to be able to say, after its last curtain, "There is the foundation stuff of a new race—something the rest of the world may never understand, because it has never happened before, and can hardly happen again until a new planet is discovered."

If you come to think of it, only rare plays can stir that feeling in you—plays whose overtones vibrate far and wide and in many channels which have little to do with the plays themselves. To call Mr. Riggs' work a "folk play" is to narrow its meaning unwarrantably. In a simple and homely way, it touches many universals—the poetry of warm nights under the moon, of fragrant hay fields under the sun, of sentinel trees cloaking young laughter in the evening, of gaily rough courtship and marriage, of lurking evil spots, like a dark Pan of the prairies, of women whose tenacity outruns that of men, of men with the cruelty of boys and sympathies as broad

as the ranges. There are very few gray patches in a play of this sort. You are either in dancing sunlight or in deep cool shadows or in utter darkness. The misty days and the lighted nights of the city simply do not exist—either as physical facts or as moral confusion. In the swift rhythm of hard work and hard play, the only tender thing is love, and even that is tender without becoming sentimental.

The story of the play is as simple as the qualities it mirrors. Curly McClain, a cowboy of parts, is courting Laurey Williams, an orphan being brought up by her tough-fibred and generous-hearted aunt, Eller Murphy. Jeeter Fry, the Murphy hired man who runs the farm, has unpleasant thoughts of his own about Laurey. Curly's courting comes to a triumphant climax at a rough-and-tumble party at "old man Peck's" house, but the night of his wedding is rendered as a different kind of climax by the brutal serenading or "shivoree" arranged by his cowboy friends. It is further complicated by the enraged attempt of Jeeter to kill him. Jeeter accidentally falls on his own knife and is killed, but as a result of the darkness and confusion, Curly must stand trial for manslaughter. Curly, however, objects strenuously to remaining in jail with a young wife waiting for him and manages to escape—thus adding an actual crime to a mere formal indictment. How Aunt Eller manages the posse which comes to hunt for Curly, how she upbraids them for siding with the United States Marshal—"a foreigner"—against one of their own, and obtains a momentary respite for the hard-driven Curly, forms the substance of

the last act. The story which, after all, is a mere succession of episodes, does little more than give the excuse for the real substance of the play, which is a re-creation of an utterly vanished phase of American life. Long after you have forgotten the story, you will remember the epic Aunt Eller, the laughing, careless and poetic Curly, the very feminine and very perverse Laura, with her erratic day-dreams and her intense loyalty, the sordid Jeeter and the rough impact of the men of the ranges, with their brutality and their songs and their chivalry all thrown together in one pot. From it all emerges a curiously triumphant song of American nationality in the making—a song in major key.

### *The Green Pastures*

I mentioned above, as the only recent play comparable to "Green Grow the Lilacs," Marc Connelly's rich-hued fantasy of Negro life and dreams, "The Green Pastures." Strictly, the plays are not in the least comparable. Yet the feeling they generate is very much alike, though differing in degree. I do not share entirely the general unrestrained enthusiasm for Connelly's notable play. Few plays of recent years have loosed such a torrent of emotional praise from at least one section of the critical press. The vocabulary of several of our leading critics seemed to crack under the strain of trying, for the first time in months, to express a genuine stir of feeling and intellect. Only here and there—as in the conspicuous case of John Mason Brown of the New York Evening Post—was the

small voice of discrimination raised to point out the ways wherein Mr. Connelly had failed to achieve a masterpiece of classic proportions.

This, I submit, was an unusual state of affairs. Our press critics are not easily reduced to an emotional pulp, nor easily prodded to a sincerity of praise which, by their own confession, beggars words. Yet the play which did this, and more, is simply a representation of the Negro's idea of heaven and of the world in the days when "God walked the earth in the likeness of a man." In view of some objections I have to make to the method and to certain underlying ideas of the play, it is only fair to let the author state his purpose in his own patently sincere words. The play is an attempt, writes Mr. Connelly, "to present certain aspects of a living religion in the terms of its believers. The religion is that of thousands of Negroes in the deep South. With terrific spiritual hunger and the greatest humility these untutored black Christians—many of whom can not even read the book which is the treasure house of their faith—have adapted the contents of the Bible to the consistencies of their everyday lives."

Further, they "accept the Old Testament as a chronicle of wonders which happened to people like themselves in vague but actual places, and of rules of conduct, true acceptance of which will lead them to a tangible, three-dimensional heaven. In this heaven, if one has been born in a district where fish fries are popular, the angels do have magnificent fish fries through an eternity somewhat resembling a series of earthly holidays. The Lord Jehovah

will be the promised Comforter, a just but compassionate Patriarch, the Summation of all the virtues His follower has observed in the human beings about him. The Lord may look like the reverend Mr. Du Bois, as our Sunday school teacher speculates in the play, or He may resemble another believer's own grandfather. In any event, His face will have an earthly familiarity to one who has come for his reward." Now the most conspicuous failure of "The Green Pastures" lies in not achieving this very simple theme which Mr. Connelly outlines with such clarity and sympathy—a theme, certainly, to which no one familiar with the mediaeval morality and miracle plays could take exception. The veil between the finite and the infinite will always be such that man will seek to represent the unknown, whether in art or in the recesses of his mind, as somehow like the known. Even the most abstract philosophers and the most advanced scientists cling to the need of objective illustration of their ideas. The upheaval in science today, for example, is largely due to the difficulty of creating mechanical models of the atom. Philosophers living in space and time have had the utmost concern in trying to find words to describe concepts of God in terms that imply neither space nor time. Anthropomorphism is purely a matter of degree and not—as those who gently patronize the illiterate Negro imply—a distinct cleavage in viewpoint between the primitive and the educated. We can afford, then, to treat the mental images of the Negro with sympathy, understanding and tenderness. We may discard all thought of irreverence

in the gentle familiarity these images imply with things divine. But what we can not accept, either emotionally or intellectually, is a mixture of images, a scrambling of pictures which we may easily ascribe to the Negro mind of the deep South with other pictures obviously concocted, on behalf of the Negro, by a sophisticated mind of New York. This is a sin against real simplicity—and it is this which mars what might have been the great beauty of Mr. Connelly's work.

The pattern of the play starts with a Sunday school lesson on the book of Genesis for a group of Negro children. One of them asks what God looks like. The preacher replies that no one knows exactly, but that he himself has always imagined God must look like the Reverend Mr. Du Bois, a famous Negro preacher of his own youth. Soon after this, the scene shifts to heaven—during one of those celestial fish fries Mr. Connelly mentions in his explanation. It is, of course, a Negro heaven, in which the Lord moves about in the dignified semblance of old Mr. Du Bois in a frock coat. From then on, we follow the scenes of creation, of the fall of man, of the Deluge and the Ark, of the exile in Egypt and of the winning of the promised land—all in terms of supposedly Negro images in which the modern and the ancient are mixed with a forced naïveté. Some of the scenes are simple and moving, the more so because of the rich accompaniment of Negro spirituals. But the general mood—and here is something which must be felt even more than sensed through reason—is one of unconscious patroniz-

ing, as if the author were constantly asking the audience the question, "Isn't this childlike simplicity utterly charming and captivating?"

Moreover, there are many scenes in which the images, as I have suggested, are distinctly false. I can only compare them to the rich man's idea of "roughing it"—to that deliberate effort at simple living which consists in traveling back to nature in a Pullman car, in hiring an expert chef as camp cook, and in calling a steam-heated log cabin a "shack." In other words, many of the scenes have a spurious simplicity forced upon them, a feeling which is not simple at all but, under surface appearances, highly complex and mentally exacting. Other scenes again have a distinctly satirical twist; and throughout the play there is a lack of that solemn grandeur which, in my limited experience, even the most uneducated Negro mind attributes to things Divine. It is characteristic of the truly simple mind to exaggerate greatness, to run to excess in hero worship. It is the boy brought up in the slums who imagines every rich man's house to be a marble and gold palace. It may be, as Mr. Connelly indicates, that the Negro imagines the business office of the Lord to be a tiny room with a couple of stiff-backed chairs and a roll-top desk; but I doubt it. The majesty and panoply of the throne are much more in keeping with the dreams of the naïve and the humble. It is precisely the sophisticate who suspects behind the trappings of royalty the banal domestic life of the king. The simple or the childlike mind conceives of the king at breakfast in ermine and wearing

his crown. I can not imagine, then, that the Negro, even of the deep South, thinks of Jehovah in commonplace surroundings, any more than the Jewish people themselves expected the King of kings to be born in a manger. It is the person of Christ—with Whom this play does not deal except in one final intimation—Whom the mind of the child clothes in the familiar simplicity of humble friendship.

At all events, childlike faith, no matter how humble, can never be truly and honestly conveyed except by those who share it, if not in its pictorial images, at least in its flaming essence, if not in its particular idiom, then certainly in its universal language. This sharing of the faith expressed permeates every instant of the mediaeval miracle plays, and the feeling of such a tenth century playwright as the nun, Hrotsvitha, to whom Rosamond Gilder devotes a well merited chapter in her vivid book, "Enter the Actress." Unfortunately, "The Green Pastures" impresses one (perhaps quite wrongly, in which case the author's technique alone is at fault) as being written by a playwright who undoubtedly has a deep respect for but does not share the essential qualities of the childlike faith of the Negro people of the deep South. It is remarkable that the play should have been written at all, and more remarkable that it should have been produced, and with such distinguished success. But it is not the equivalent, in our own day, of the plays that grew up around the mediaeval Church. Such a play remains to be written in the new creative period we are about to enter.

*Burlesque*

It would involve a serious lapse of memory and gratitude, if one failed to recall another play of very distinct type—in fact the best of a series of plays of the same type, setting out, one and all, to romanticize or dramatize certain special phases of American stage life. “Burlesque,” the comedy of a small battle successfully fought by two vaudeville artists, was written jointly by Arthur Hopkins and George Mankin Watters. It is a good example of distinguished technique employed on a theme of universal, if simple, interest—love, jealousy, temporary defeat and renewal of faith and success. It is important for the future theatre chiefly as illustrating how the humblest materials may be used with beguiling effect. Much of its success may have been due to Arthur Hopkins’ carefully executed production, but I imagine that the play will live long among the stock companies and little theatres.

Most of the plays I have recalled as belonging to the “dramas of emergence” have won through to a certain success as the reward of an underlying truth and strength in their themes. But more than theme is demanded. The dramatization of Julia Peterkin’s novel, “Scarlet Sister Mary,” is a case in point of inherent defects defeating an honest and fine purpose.

*Scarlet Sister Mary*

On the whole, I found “Scarlet Sister Mary” a deeply sincere but—for rather long stretches—a rather lifeless

effort to portray the struggle of a Negress through suffering, bitterness and the bondage of free love to an understanding, at last, of the true freedom of surrender to God. There can be no question of the play's artistic restraint. The Magdalens of the world have followed many roads to their final illumination—some of the roads strewn with enough vice and furor to be an everlasting temptation to the showman who is seeking a moral excuse for portraying immorality. But this play takes no advantage of the obvious chances offered for sensationalism. On the contrary, it strikes only at those moments of supreme decision in the life of Sister Mary which give shape and meaning to the struggle of her soul. To this extent it might serve as a model for all playwrights who are sincerely trying to picture the honest problems of life without photographing all the lurid details which those problems collect about them. There is not the least effort to play up the sensual and the obvious on the trumped-up excuse of realism. The play passes over, between the second and last acts, the entire period during which Sister Mary defied God.

The first part of the play ends with her decision to recapture the joy of life which she lost when her husband deserted her, and with the note of triumphant freedom which she thinks this decision has brought to her. When the second part begins, she is still encased in the pride of her rebellion against the code of other men, and scornful of the need of God. But the death of her first-born son, and the brief sight of her husband stir within her all

the forces she has so diligently repressed. Her soul begins to clamor for an "easement." In the moment of her son's death, the barriers are first broken. His soul makes for her the bridge to eternity, at the end of which she can at last see God—the Giver and the Taker of life, to Whom she must surrender. She makes that surrender, and in doing so finds the true freedom she has always sought and never really found before. There is something intended, and something attained, of the theme of "The Hound of Heaven" in the last few moments of the play—moments which Ethel Barrymore, who created the part, used to the hilt and with thrilling conviction.

Unfortunately, the author has not been so adept in maintaining dramatic interest as in using artistic judgment. The Broadway cynics might easily point to the flatness of many passages in the play as clear proof that more realism is needed—more of the excitement of Sister Mary's sinful adventures to balance the periods of crucial decision. This view, that all manner of filth can be put upon the stage, given the excuse of a "moral" ending, is part of the Broadway creed. Perhaps it was best summed up in one memorable motion picture production of Dante's *Inferno*. This amazing spectacle—to which many of the clergy were solemnly invited—produced the rare effect on me of inciting me to verse! My rhymed comment was the following:

*To Dante*

*(On the occasion of the Broadway film version of the Inferno.)*

Six centuries had gifted you with fame,  
Aglow like stardust in the wintry night  
With that resplendent instancy of light  
That beats about the glory of your name.  
But time grew jealous of this rich acclaim,  
And deftly spun the notion that you might  
(With sundry adaptations) earn the right  
To be a movie star in Broadway's game.  
The many circles in your woeful Hell  
Included—so they found—the pit of lust,  
(A spot that screens superlatively well!)  
And so they dealt your dream this mordant thrust—  
To film it as the flashback in a plot  
Of Modern Business and its gilded pot!

With all due apologies for attacking one atrocity with another, I still feel that the point involved marks all the difference between sincere playwriting, such as "Scarlet Sister Mary," and the annual flood of reform vice—with all spotlights on the vice—with which dozens of our plays are saturated. The real defect of "Scarlet Sister Mary" is not in its omission of Sister Mary's lurid days, but in the handling of the material actually used. Many incidents are not sufficiently compacted to bring out their true dramatic strength. Unessential details are prolonged and moments of essential drama are skimmed over too lightly and quickly, robbing them of most of their signif-

icance. Part of this is due to the writing, but I readily admit that quite as much may have been due to the direction of the Barrymore production, which was poorly timed and frequently languid in pace. Still another trouble lay in the use of a white cast for an all Negro play. Whatever theories we may have had about Negro actors for Negro plays a few years ago, such amazing productions as "Porgy" and "The Green Pastures" have shown us the utter futility of attempting to create illusion by make-up and labored accent alone. Neither Miss Barrymore herself nor any member of her company succeeded for any sustained period in establishing or holding the illusion of the colored race. The sense of reality was constantly being shattered by the intrusion either of details of poor make-up or of unhappy lapses in assumed accent. It was only when Miss Barrymore by her sheer vitality made you forget entirely that the play was about Negroes that it achieved moments of real power.

Even this brief survey of a few of the more important plays of semi-serious character is enough, I believe, to establish the hope that the American theatre is well on its way toward a distinguished maturity. The instinct of emergence, of doing away with the fogs and spiritual pessimism of bilious adolescence is strong and is waxing, and we are still too far from dyspeptic old age to dread the appearance of a gloomy if combative American Ibsen. Our future is well in the grasp of youth—and of youth grown too wise in the onrush of self-conquest to sing many dirges of defeat.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE PRISONERS OF DOUBT

IN the last chapter, I mentioned the important fact that the same playwright will often create plays of opposite spiritual type. We all experience moods of deep bewilderment. We know the anguish of facing apparently insoluble problems. But, as we are not all creative artists, we do not all seek relief by projecting our own confusion onto a group of imaginary characters. The playwright, unfortunately, often feels his deepest creative impulse at the very moment when he is least capable of shedding enlightenment through his work. His writing becomes a form of mental escape. He feels that once he has anchored his own problem on his characters, he himself is rid of it. Of course, this is only a feeling and not a fact. He has simply postponed the answer to his problem. He has become a literary Micawber, shouting "Thank God that's paid off!", when, in fact, he has only given his demand note for a debt to his own conscience.

By blessed chance it often happens that a play started in confusion works through to a luminous ending. Artists can and often do untie their psychological knots in the very process of writing. When this happens, a very fine play is apt to result. But when the knot simply grows

tighter, and the artist insists on finishing his play notwithstanding—then we are afflicted with plays of painful frustration. The authors have become prisoners of their own doubts. The answers they give to their theme questions are inconclusive or even tricky and evasive. Sometimes the writer gives no answer at all.

### *Craig's Wife*

One of the most amazing examples of a dramatic answer that completely evaded the issue was George Kelly's "Craig's Wife." In this play, the amiable, astute and usually clear-headed author turned his attention from group portraiture to that of a selfish woman. The play is an honest, and at times a brilliant thrust at the woman whose marriage instinct is limited to the security which it gives her life and to the visible property which is the symbol of that security. It is not, unfortunately, one of those plays which, given its characters, seems to work out its own conclusion. The author steps too frequently before the footlights, in the person of one or another of his characters, to explain what is happening or about to happen. This effect comes more from faulty construction than from the necessities of the story. It might have been avoided.

You have here a wife who is determined to feather her own nest. She sets about it by various means, some subtle, others blatant—by being cold or disagreeable to Walter Craig's old friends, by gaining complete dominion over his every action, by making her house a domestic

god, perfect in every surface detail, never to be defiled by cigarette ashes, misplaced ornaments, or even by flowers "because the petals fall all over the rugs." One gathers that she has reacted from a mother who always gave in to others and suffered for her weakness. If the delight or derision with which audiences greet each new evidence of Mrs. Craig's implacable character furnishes any criterion, this country of ours must be overridden with such women. You can almost hear them breathing, "Just like Mrs. So-and-so." The apparent awakening and final revolt of Walter Craig become a source of popular joy. There can be little doubt that Mr. Kelly strikes near home—in fact, just next door! (There may even be some honest enough to accept the tale the mirror tells!)

But there are several defects in "Craig's Wife" which rankle none the less. For example, there is no real suspense. The author gives a complete outline of Mrs. Craig's character in the first act. Nothing is left to development or later discovery. And to make the points at issue clearer, Mrs. Craig is made far too conscious of what she is doing. If she knew half as much about the hidden springs of her selfish actions as the author would indicate, she could not live in the same house with herself for one day. The worst of characters nearly always discovers an imaginary excuse for gross selfishness. Mrs. Craig calls herself a spade—which is hardly credible. Of course she is admittedly digging for her own ends—but even the blackest spade would probably call itself a garden implement. The "Show-Off" had no such structural weakness.

Its hero was serenely unconscious of his own bombast. For that reason it was a better play. But the theme of "Craig's Wife" hits deeper, and nearer to the core of serious human maladjustments. That is why its inherent interest surmounts even obvious structural defects. It does, however, leave you with one curious question. Why does Walter Craig meet his problem by not meeting it? He simply withdraws from the house. Is this a real surging of manhood—or just an escape? To me, "Craig's Wife" has the aspect of a completely unfinished play—or at least one with a very futile last gesture. The more you consider Walter Craig's problem (which is the theme question of the play) the more evident it becomes that his revolt is about as effective as the childish stamping of a foot. He does at last see his wife in her true character—and promptly smashes an ornament or two to show his independence. But he does not attempt, for even five minutes, to tame this singular shrew. His departure has all the dignity of a "strategic retreat," but morally it is a complete rout. Where is the lusty spirit of Shakespeare's hero? Where the lash of words and the granite firmness? Walter Craig just calls it a day and accepts defeat by vanishing. Few plays better illustrate the paradox of an ending that is not an ending. If widower Craig ever has a second wife, she will probably be just like the first. The Craigs who never face issues simply hold out their arms to trouble!

As a sample of the tricky and misleading ending which playwrights sometimes use—perhaps unconsciously—to

cover up an unsolved issue, I can think of no important play more eloquently futile than Philip Barry's "Tomorrow and Tomorrow."

*Tomorrow and Tomorrow*

In this play, Barry has apparently come under the spell of psychoanalytical dabbling. From the gay charm of "Holiday" to the serious symbolism of "Hotel Universe" was a long step, but firmly and bravely taken. In "Tomorrow and Tomorrow," however, he steps deep into a bog—the impetus, curiously enough, coming from the theme of Elisha and the Shunammite woman. He has interpreted this theme of nobility and faith as it might be interpreted by the combined efforts of Messrs. Erskine, Freud and Jung.

In the biblical story, the childless woman of Shunam is given a child through the prayers of Elisha, whom she and her husband have befriended and taken into their home. Later, the child dies from a strange malady and is brought back to life by the prophet. It evidently occurred to Barry that he could improve considerably upon this theme by substituting an itinerant lecturer on psychiatry for the prophet, a carnal love affair between the lecturer and the wife of his host for Elisha's fruitful prayers, and a brief psychoanalytic treatment, about ten years later, for the prophet's miracle in behalf of the child. Since Mr. Barry quotes the opening text of the biblical story on the program, the purpose of this modern "rationalization" can hardly be mistaken.

There can be no question of Barry's skill as a playwright. His dialogue is matchless. His unspoken dialogue is even better. He is one of the few living playwrights who knows the full implications of a silence. He can also convey minor shadings of emotion with a delicate pliancy that seems to heap meanings upon very minor incidents. For this very reason, the essential crudity of his present story has gone largely unchallenged in the critical columns. The play progresses from one maudlin absurdity to another with such outer grace and charm that its inner implications apparently pass unnoticed. If—let us suppose—Professor Nicholas Hay and Eve Redman had been swept into their love in a moment of weakness, had felt its disloyalty so keenly that they separated for years, and if the professor's return to save the life of his own child could have resulted in a climax of renunciation, then, aside from the biblical travesty, the play might have had some understandable values. It is only in the extreme Puritan tradition that scarlet letters can never be erased by repentance. But a moral wrong, involving the added implications of disloyalty, which not only goes unrepented but becomes a source of secret pride, is quite another matter. Eve Redman rejoices in the knowledge of her child's true father. Hay does not learn of his parenthood until the last act—though why he should never have suspected it is a bit hazy. But once he does learn, he can think of only one thing—persuading Eve to come away with him. Her reason for not doing this is simply that she can not bear to inflict such a blow and discovery on her solidly good husband. Hence a



PHILIP BARRY

. . . we need him badly in the moods of "Hotel Universe" and "Holiday," but not in the mires of "Tomorrow and Tomorrow."



final parting from Hay with tears under light verbal flippancy.

If ever a well written play showed complete topsyturvydom of moral and spiritual values, it is this one. Nor does it rate much better when it comes to plausibility of the action itself. Even a skilled psychiatrist might well be puzzled at the rapidity of the child's cure in the last act—in spite of long theoretical explanations of the psychic cause of the illness itself. Psychiatric treatment is seldom notably swift in achieving its results. To be asked to believe that a fatal illness can be cured in five minutes of honeyed words from ever so skilful a doctor is to have one's credulity tried too far.

I do not deny for a minute the sensitiveness with which Barry has delineated emotions. If plays had nothing to do with life and the experience of truth, one might be able to join the chorus of praise for an exceptionally well written play. One must even admit that there are many people who might act and think and feel as Barry's characters do. But they would not deserve the implied comments of the play itself. They would not be cast in heroic or exalted mould. Their essential disloyalty—the more pronounced because it brings no qualms—would not be held up for sympathy and admiration. It is in such cases that the intentions and viewpoint of the author play a large part in the ultimate valuation of a story. Robert Benchley, to his everlasting credit, is one of the few critics to pierce through the sham and trickery of this play, particularly in pointing out that Professor Hay never acts otherwise than

as the perfect cad—one who knows, by professional experience, the effect of his words and actions, and never hesitates to take a bounder's advantage. Barry's excursion into experimental psychology has not been helpful. What some would call his "mechanism of projection" tells too many tales of a deep confusion in the only life values and in the only feelings of good sportsmanship that count.

*In a Garden*

Nor was Barry far more fortunate in one of his earlier plays that attracted much attention—"In a Garden." A better title for this play would have been "Caught in His Own Trap." Barry, softly transposing Ibsen's "Doll's House" to another key, has tried to tell the story of a sensitive and spontaneous wife who has lived under the dominion of a playwriting husband who sees all life, including his own, in strict terms of the theatre. He would analyze his own romance at the very moment it was taking place. He would see his wife as a character in a play, and "stage" her life accordingly, for the jovial purpose of discovering her "reactions" and proving how perfect was his own knowledge of human emotions. He knows every one "like a book"—meaning that he knows no one as a human being.

Unfortunately, Barry's own play indicates that he was, at that stage of his career, precisely that same type of dramatist. It has precisely the bookish quality he derides—shows the same undue fascination with a theme or thesis—and consequently carries no illusion whatever of reality.

It is like a dull man telling you dully how dull he finds his next-door neighbor. Barry tells you artificially how artificial he finds the minds of some dramatists. If, by any unhappy chance, Barry is satirizing some particular writer of today's theatre, that victim can respond—"Praise be, thou too hast written a play!"

In the end, the wife in this play, failing to bring her husband to terms with reality, trots out the back door like Ibsen's Nora (also, like Kelly's Walter Craig), and the dismayed playwright vents his amazement in pulling down the flowers of a garden "set" which he had constructed in his own living room to further one of his domestic experiments. But where Ibsen at least wrote a strong play, with whose moral index one might take issue seriously, Barry's effort, because inconclusive, does not merit even serious pulling to pieces—so completely artificial is it, so mechanically motivated, and so heavily larded with false sentiment. The wife, as a character, has possibilities of reality. By herself, she is an excellent type portrait, easily understood and commanding considerable sympathy up to the last act, when the plot jumps in and robs her of reality very much as Kelly robbed his Walter Craig of reality. We might call the play as a whole, elephantine—were it wholly fair to elephants, who are not limp and indefinite but alive, spontaneous and conclusive in their bulk!

We can match, then, the caddish implications of "Tomorrow and Tomorrow" and the vague artificialities of "In a Garden" with the calm wisdom of "Hotel Uni-

verse" and the impish delights of "Holiday"—and having matched them, all we can ask is, "Who and what is the real Barry?" I think he is by all odds one of our three or four most important playwrights. But will his fatal facility with words carry him away from strong values to an irresponsible mirage of wit and sophistication? We have urgent need of him—in the mood of "Hotel Universe" or in the mood of "Holiday." But in the mood of "Tomorrow and Tomorrow" he is a poor leader for earnest playwrights.

### *The Silver Cord*

Sidney Howard is another writer of conflicting moods. I have already mentioned the contrast between "They Knew What They Wanted" with its fine spiritual crescendo and the dour tragedy of "Lucky Sam McCarver." In "The Silver Cord," Howard, like Barry, has dipped far into the jargon and complexities of psychoanalysis and emerged the worse for his bath. Jung and Freud have both made their signal contributions to a better understanding of neurotic states. But their offerings have been tentative, experimental and subject to the constant revision and modification provided by any honest scientist. They have not pretended to say the last word. Moreover, a great deal that they have said is not to be taken too literally. In "The Silver Cord," Howard has taken that old wheeze, the "Œdipus Complex," and dressed it up as literally as a fundamentalist parson dresses up his Genesis. The result is a play of appalling frustration and confusion.

The great play on the wrong kind of motherhood still

remains to be written. Not that Sidney Howard failed completely. He has, in fact, written two extremely fine acts. But he has failed to probe deeply enough into the spiritual significance of his theme to give the play as a whole any sense of true greatness or universality. It is a play largely of surface qualities handled throughout much of its length in a vein of bitter comedy, and diverging at times into the by-paths of a rather obvious "science." It acts well and achieves at many points a fine pitch of theatrical intensity. But it lacks deeper understanding, the richness of mature sympathy, and dramatic as distinct from theatrical power.

The story concerns five people: a mother, Mrs. Phelps; her two sons, David and Robert; David's new wife; and Robert's fiancée. Mrs. Phelps is the cloying, possessive type of mother whose secret ambition is to keep her sons forever dependent on her; the kind of mother who instantly resents the appearance of another woman in her son's life. Of the two sons in the play, Robert is the chief victim, the dupe of his mother's wiles, and so tied to her apron strings that at her suggestion he breaks off his engagement, doubtful whether any girl can ever be as wonderful as his mother has been. David has more innate independence. He has married abroad and brought his wife home for a brief visit, and the wife he has chosen is a girl of considerable stamina, a graduate in biology with a career ahead of her in the Rockefeller Institute. But even David wavers under his mother's prompt attack. There is a moment when he, too, is ready to think he has made a mistake and is saved

only when his wife brings the struggle into the open and calls a spade a very black shovel. The final curtain descends on David's departure, with Robert still at his mother's knee.

It would be quite useless to deny that many find this play exceedingly disagreeable. Just as there are people who consider it unpatriotic to protest against the Eighteenth Amendment, there are those who resent the least suggestion that the power of a mother's love may be abused. This kind of person calls "The Silver Cord" a slander on motherhood—forgetting that nothing in the world is quite so destructive as something good put to a bad use. Wrong-minded sympathy has coddled criminals—and that kind of sympathy deserves attack. And where mother love is turned from its primary purpose of creating self-reliant manhood into a suffocating and emasculating thing, then it, too, deserves the revealing scorn of the dramatist. In fact, this theme, if properly handled, can only serve to exalt true motherhood to impregnable heights.

Where the adverse critics of the Howard play find some real justification is in various theatrical exaggerations which tend to remove it from universal application. Mrs. Phelps is so extreme in her type that many who should gather a wholesome personal lesson from the play go away puffed up with a sense of rectitude. They admit readily enough that they have known one or two mothers of that kind. They probably say that Mrs. Phelps is really Mrs. So-and-so. But just as no one ever took "Craig's Wife" personally,

these people fail to see tendencies in themselves similar to Mrs. Phelps. She becomes something utterly apart from themselves, a monstrosity—instead of the representative of a universal human failing, present in a great many people, even if only to a faint degree. And by taking the play in this limited sense, they say that it is a special and disagreeable subject, more fit for discussion in psychological laboratories than for presentation on the stage.

But we must remember that the theme is not a special one. Its application is as broad as life, not only from the point of view of the mother pictured in this play, but from the position of the son, who may refuse to go forth and meet life because he has never really outgrown the attitude of infancy which seeks protection from hardship in the ideal of a mother's love. The sexualized interpretation of this instinct popularized by Freud has, for many, confused the issue and given it repellent implications. But in the broader sense, there are very few adults who have not experienced at some time the urge to go back to a period when all decisions were made for them and when the world gave no buffets that could not be forgotten at a mother's knee. And when a grown man gives in too often and too completely to this instinct, he soon finds he has lost his power to meet the problems of a man. He has become, mentally, a child once more, though physically still an adult.

If this instinct were less strongly rooted in human nature, there would be fewer mothers able to exert that un-

due influence over their grown sons which gives the substance to Howard's play. Unfortunately, however, the Howard play does not make this aspect clear. The whole blame is thrown upon the mother. She seems almost too conscious of what she is doing. She does not suffer enough when her daughter-in-law faces her with the truth of what she has been doing. Looking back, it seems probable that the last act is the one which weakens the play and saps its universal vitality. This act becomes almost a lecture on the previous acts. It seems to be something as much apart from the play itself as an author's postscript.

What Sidney Howard has failed to do, is to show where the sons have it in their power to reject this cloying influence without rejecting their mother as a person. This is where Howard has taken his Freudianism too literally and superficially. One son merely yields to the strength of his wife—like a rope in a tug of war—and the other sees no choice beyond remaining by his mother's knee. Neither one sees that the real "silver cord" is within himself, consisting in the tie to childish dependence. The son who lets his wife pull him away is merely substituting one kind of dependence for another. The son who remains would still be a mental dependent if his mother died. For both of them the play ends in complete frustration—through not knowing what it is that chains them and through the inability, bred of ignorance and weak will, to break that chain. These boys are as futile as Walter Craig—even though they smash no china to prove it!

*Mrs. Moonlight*

Much of this same theme of regression to childhood fantasy is apt to underly plays of a nebulous though often charming character. Plays of this sort can not be said to break through spiritual fogs any more effectively than one of a more blatant type, and in a certain sense they are more distressing because of their very subtlety. I have in mind particularly that charmingly written fantasy of Benn Levy's, "Mrs. Moonlight." It presents a most amazing contrast to the brittle wit of "Art and Mrs. Bottle."

In many respects, "Mrs. Moonlight" does not deserve the rather distinguished success it attained. It is filled to the brim with moments of rare sentimental beauty and with many scenes of real insight and power—but it would never succeed in maintaining its precarious illusion without superlatively fine acting. Good actors must carry it over mountains of improbability—and if they fail in the last act, it is because the author at last demands the impossible, from actors and audience alike.

There have been other plays written of perpetual youth, but none that I can recall with the general theme of "Mrs. Moonlight"—namely, that it is sheer tragedy to remain young when those about us whom we love grow old. Through the character of an old Scotch nurse, we are led to believe that before her wedding, Sarah Moonlight wore a necklace with the magic power of granting one wish. Sarah's fatal wish was that she might never grow out-

wardly old. Like the Midas touch of gold, the granted wish has tragic consequences. Sarah begins to see a dark future, during which she will become more and more of a freak—a source of unending sorrow to her husband and her child. The shell of youth over an aging heart will become a curse. Unable to face this prospect—chiefly because of what it will bring to others—she bids a tender farewell to all she loves and disappears.

In the second episode, Sarah returns, twenty years later, posing as the daughter of her own sister. She finds her husband married to another sister, and her own daughter grown to womanhood. She remains just long enough to prevent this daughter from making an unfortunate marriage and then disappears again into the misty vagueness of continental Europe. Throughout this episode, the situations remain plausible enough, once the main fantasy is accepted. Whoever takes the part of Sarah, must manage with exceptional technique to give the feeling of increasing age with the appearance of perpetual youth. Granted this, her presence is thoroughly explained, and one can become a willing party to the illusion.

But in the final episode—still another twenty years later—the author's ingenuity fails him. Sarah returns for the second time, to enter a household in which her husband is a feeble-minded man of ninety, living entirely in his memories, in which her daughter is happily married, with a grown son, and in which the old Scotch nurse—the only one who knows the truth—still sits in a high chair, knitting and mumbling strange things. This time, unfortu-

nately for the plot, there is no reason why Sarah should not be recognized. She has not changed from the girl of the second episode—a girl, that is, who remained nearly three weeks as a visitor in the home, and whose influence in that time was so profound as to alter completely the lives of several of the characters. They ought to remember her. Yet they all see her in the third episode, talk with her and still wonder who she can be and whence she comes. Even the license of fantasy does not permit such situations. They destroy the very illusion of illusion itself. There is much tenderness and pathos in this last act—but the author has defeated his purpose by not having the action take place solely between the old man, his ever-young wife and the nurse.

As to the broader aspects of "Mrs. Moonlight," I must return to the fact that it partakes of that rather subtle psychological illness which pervaded "Berkeley Square," the sense of regression into the land of dreams, in which many of the dreams are fraught with terror and others with the sadness of frustration. Sarah, after all, must be accepted in far more than the literal sense, as the soul of extreme youth to which it is tragedy for us to cling too long. She becomes, then, in all her fragile loveliness, the symbol of enchanting memories which hold within themselves the sickness of the poppy. There is no denying the beauty of many of the scenes of this play nor their essential poetry. But the play is not one of victory.

It is never easy to select examples of types of plays without omitting many that merit equal attention. But by

choosing a few plays of widely varied plot and material, by authors of sharply contrasting mentalities, it is at least possible to trace the outline of those similarities in theme, in tone and in temper which escape the casual glance. On the whole, American plays which betray lack of decisive will and a certain aimless groping are too numerous, yet not to the danger point. The prevailing spirit of recent American authorship is what one would expect in a period of rising creative effort. Only at intervals does it fall into a mood of regression or bewilderment or inadequacy before its own stated dramatic problems. In its freer moments, it is bold, young and determined.

## CHAPTER VIII

### ACTION!—ACTION!

MAGIC, mystery and melodrama all hold a secure place in the American theatre—provided they have action, and in abundance, outer, objective action that swings perilously from incident to incident. Sometimes, when a poet turns to this type of play, we find charm and subtle humor as well. But action dominates always, and the American spirit moulds it easily into countless forms.

Of course I shall forever feel that our stage owes a debt far beyond its means of repayment to Earl Derr Biggers for "Seven Keys to Baldpate." It helped to set a pattern upon which the success of "The Bat" and numberless similar plays rests. But even "Baldpate" can not quite hold the pace with that other living classic, "The Tavern."

#### *The Tavern*

All the mild madness that goes to make up magic is packed into "The Tavern." One loves it for its utter vagabondage, its ridiculous underscorings and exaggerations, and above all for its triumphant "theatre." Just because it is wholly preposterous—and meant to be so—it is the best example our stage has known in a decade of the power of illusion, standing stark and by itself.

This matter of "theatre"—or illusion—is one of the great mysteries which keeps the stage alive through the centuries. You can not define it exactly without belittling it, much as you can not define the idea of the infinite. You can say that theatrical illusion is the power to make an audience believe in the reality of what they see going on, sink into and accept the stage situations, forget grease-paint and costumes and memorized lines and identify themselves with one or more of the characters on the stage. But that is a thin and wholly inadequate way of describing illusion. It fits the normal play reasonably well. It even fits light fantasies such as "Peter Pan." But it falls desperately short of fitting the antics of clowns, the grotesque humor of a Chaplin, or the broad blows and sharp thrusts of obvious satire. The extraordinary thing about a play like "The Tavern" is that it gives you the illusion—as intended—of *not* being real. It partakes of magic precisely because it asks you at one and the same time to reject it with your intelligence and to accept it with your eyes and your emotions.

After all, this is the essence of the magician's art. The conjurer does not ask you nor expect you to believe that he can make a dove out of thin air, or saw a living woman in two without killing her. The more you reject this with your intelligence, the more you enjoy the illusion of seeing the impossible accomplished before your eyes. You say to yourself, "There must be a trick in it," but you enjoy the illusion for its own sake, and all the more because you know it is a trick. The whole sum and substance of the

magician's art is in making you love illusion just because you know it is only illusion. That is where the avowed magician differs from the occultist or the fakir.

I once heard a disciple of Houdini explain why it was that this master of tricks could expose "mediums" who had defied the closest observation of scientists. Scientists, he explained, start with observation, and try to find an explanation of observed facts. They depend to an amazing degree upon the limited power of the senses. The magician, on the other hand, starts out with the sceptical formula that anything out of keeping with common sense and cumulative human experience is impossible. He refuses resolutely to accept the testimony of his senses, because he knows, from his own experience, that fooling the senses is a comparatively easy matter. He looks instead for a trick. He says to himself, "If I wanted to produce this particular illusion, how would I go about it?" Before long, he has constructed a trick to accomplish the illusion, and with this as a clue, proceeds to find a way for exposing the trick of the "medium." Nine times out of ten he succeeds.

In other words, the magician is an honest man by nature. He enjoys proving to you the limitation of your own senses, but he does not seek to debauch your intelligence. "The Tavern," as a play, is distinctly the work of a magician, making you enjoy impossible nonsense just because it is impossible. It creates, not the illusion of a recognized nor even an imaginary reality, but the illusion of the utterly absurd—madness thrown into the pot of magic and brought forth as so many rabbits with pink tails and blue

ears. And just because it is magic and packed with the movement and life and thrill of the theatre, you accept it, welcome it and greet it with a rush of enthusiasm.

Of course there is something more to "The Tavern" than magical nonsense and satirical melodrama. There is the character of the Vagabond—the central, half-mad figure who sees all life as drama. Not only because George M. Cohan once played this part, and to the hilt, but because of the part itself, the Vagabond stands for something eternal. "To be free on a night like this, in the storm"—the glorious gallantry of it! that is his theme. Play-boy of all time—romancer—defender of forgotten illusions—that part of the spirit of man which will never be kept under lock and key, which wanders the road, which yields to the madness of the moon.

It is a good thing for the stage to have occasional revivals of "The Tavern." It makes us see, in a flashing glance, how far too seriously we take the theatre—or else, if you prefer, how far too theatrically we take the serious. All about us are people who would make the stage a pulpit, or, if not that, then a medical laboratory, or a psychological clinic or a sociological blunderbuss, or simply a place to tell dirty stories with forced wit. How few there are to be content with it as a place for magic, nonsense, improvisation and sheer mental adventure—for Harlequin and his crew and the reign of topsy-turvy!

Mr. Cohan's own performance in this play is part of the integral impression it has left upon many—a performance that touched the real core of artistry, moving from the ro-

mantic swagger of the first scenes right through to that mad climax when he danced out into the storm, brandishing his crooked cane and chanting the song of man's everlasting freedom. No other man could do this quite as Cohan did it, chiefly because no other man of our time has understood better, cherished more completely and lived more thoroughly the very magic we call "theatre."

In complete contrast to the melodrama of magic, we have developed another type of play which, instead of asking you to believe in the impossible, asks you to see drama in the most ultra-possible happenings of every-day life. It is a melodrama of photographic reality, born of the native American sense of sensational journalism. One of the best examples of it in recent years was "Broadway." "The Front Page" and "Five Star Final" are more recent outbreaks of the same order. The three together form a well rounded exhibit of the way in which America can castigate itself and find riotous entertainment in the process.

### *Broadway*

"Broadway" is a play which shattered all the defenses of the "high-brows." Its authors, Philip Dunning and George Abbott, as well as its then youthful producer, Jed Harris, had the almost unique experience of finding the newspaper critics of one mind. "Broadway" had every adjective applied to it except those of restraint or qualification. It was showered with superlatives as carelessly as one would turn the garden hose on a pet lawn. There is still time,

however, to take honest stock of this play, especially as it is still used as a model for other similar plays, and to see just what qualities it has that might have merited its extraordinary reception.

First of all, it deals with what was at that time comparatively new theatrical material—the inner workings of a Broadway cabaret with the modern complication of bootleggers and highjackers. Here one had a rough though fertile field for ploughing, sowing and reaping the oldest and most enduring elements of melodrama in entirely fresh terms. It is true, of course, that the very timeliness of the material and the extent to which the situations of the play depend upon circumstances of the moment, deprive this particular piece of much of its lasting interest. But perhaps for that very reason, it still bristles (under Prohibition!) with amazing vitality. It has, of course, all the needless profanity in which modern “realism” seems to delight. But that, I take it, is tacked on and is not part of the essential quality of the play.

In the second place, the authors very wisely confined themselves to telling the story. They did not yield to the temptation of making comments on prohibition or on the galaxy of new-fangled crime to which it has given birth. The audience is quite free to draw its own conclusions. The people it sees are intensely human, each one looking out upon life through his own limits of vision. The characters collide with each other as inevitably and fatally as a herd of horses wearing blinders and with no guiding reins.

The third important element is its well constructed melodramatic plot. The authors have taken every advantage of their material to restate the oldest and simplest formula of melodrama without having it seem too reminiscent of the good old days of the "10-20-30." After the high-brows and sophisticates were through tossing their hats in the air, many of them had to admit rather sheepishly that the thing they liked best of all in "Broadway" is what the lowest of low-brows enjoys even today, in the lower run of movie houses. This is where criticism fell down. It failed to recognize the obvious and the trite simply because they appeared in new dress.

### *The Front Page*

Jed Harris was also the original producer of the second of the trio I mentioned of realistic melodramas, "The Front Page," by Charles MacArthur and Ben Hecht. As happens so often in the case of plays of pure action, the production details had much to do with its initial success.

Considered solely as a piece of swift, rhythmic and pulsating staging, the Jed Harris production of this play stood almost without peer. Until the fatal doldrums of the last third of the last act, it moved with tempestuous fury, with exactly those ominous lulls which lend terror to a storm. I can find no other apt comparison, but this one serves quite well enough, particularly as the rhythm of a storm is probably the least mechanical of the splendors we are privileged to witness.

But if we are heartless enough to consider "The Front

Page" in retrospect and simply as a play, it resembles more the debris left behind by a storm. Such a hodgepodge of plot mechanics, vast improbabilities, deliberate hokum and faked sentimentalities one could hardly find in even the most lurid of ancient melodramas; and if one did find them, all lumped together, they would surely be arranged to more telling effect. Another newspaper play of less renown, "Gentlemen of the Press," by Ward Moorehouse, was far better as a play, though by no means as enthralling a melodrama. In other words, the sum total of excitement which certainly seized the audience at "The Front Page" was the result of nothing less than a magnificent tour de force of direction, working with a splendid group of actors, which bridged over the weak and almost ridiculous moments of the play with breathless speed, and achieved final illusion by a sleight of hand very much like that of the parlor magician. When the play itself crumbles, the director draws your attention away from the weakness by creating a clatter or a laugh in another quarter. He makes you watch his left hand in the air, while his right hand is fumbling for the rabbit in his coat tails. The result is entertaining, but it is palpable trickery none the less.

A great deal was written in the daily press at the time about the flood of profanity which engulfs most of this play; written, one might add, in many cases, with a sort of half apology to the authors for daring to question the good taste of their realism. Now of course this excuse of realism is pure humbug when it comes to the deliberate and constant profaning of the name of God or Christ.

We all know—all of us, at least, who have served an apprenticeship in newspaper reporting—that newspapermen in a criminal courts press room are not exactly dainty in their speech. If you are going to be utterly real about them, you are going to put plenty of profanity in their mouths. But you are going to do more—that is, if you are sincere in your passion for realism. You are going to put certain snake-whip vulgarities in their mouths as well, vulgarities of the kind which boys write on back fences to prove they are almost grown up! You are going to be just as willing to offend good taste concerning vulgarities as good taste (and deeper feelings) concerning the name of God. In other words, you are going to be real, right down the line, or resign your job. But these modern humbugs who use a profane oath as freely as a flapper uses face powder are smitten with a sudden coy sensitiveness when it comes to the major vulgarities. True, they call a street walker by her shortest name. They mix up human and canine genealogy with joyous freedom. But they blush and fall dumb when it comes to certain expressions as common in newspaperdom as on the back fences of the land. And that is why I call them humbugs. They use the excuse of realism just so far, and no farther. They use it far enough to make the name of God a football of dialogue; but they shut up like frightened schoolboys before those resounding vulgarities which, to my certain knowledge, are twice as frequent in rough talk as even the most careless and habitual profanities. What these authors and their producers lack is plain ordinary honesty. They are hypocrites. It is time for a

great rush of clean wind to sweep away their favorite smoke screen of "realism" and let them stand for what they are in the spotlight!

On one other point, however, I want to be very clear. "The Front Page," with all its unnecessary and hypocritical profanity, is still about as free from smut and innuendo and sneaky double meanings as any play of recent years. The story, slight as it is, runs clear and sharp and honestly. There is not the smallest attempt in it to flirt with dirt. Whatever it has to say about the back-stairs doings of Chicago politicians (and, by the way, is the New York City "ring" the only one in the country with enough poetic instinct to adopt a flaming nickname?), that much it says honestly and brutally but without a smirk.

This story concerns the escape of a criminal about to be hanged, and the efforts of the Herald-Examiner to make a scoop out of his voluntary surrender. Involved in this situation is the Herald-Examiner reporter, Hildy Johnson. Johnson had every good intention of leaving that night for an advertising job in New York to please his fiancée, who has grown excusably irritated with his hectic newspaper life. But the zest of a gorgeous newspaper story is too much for him. His good intentions fly out of the window just as the escaped criminal crawls in through it, and from then on Hildy wages a battle royal between news instinct and love instinct. The nearest description you can reach of the play is to call it comedy-melodrama, bordering often on farce, and in the original production kept hugely alive by the best stage tricks and stage business of

many years. There is no let-down until that last act when, so to speak, the play turns quite "lovely" and hopelessly inept. It is interesting to see—as recording the progress of talkies—how completely a later screen version was able to capture the original fire and zest and humor of "The Front Page," and without resort to the pervading profanity of the stage play.

### *Five Star Final*

The third (and my favorite) example of photographic melodrama is Louis Weitzenkorn's "Five Star Final." It is my favorite because, of all plays of this type, which at times eclipse good taste in their "realism," this one stands conspicuous as almost the only one which blazes with something approaching a crusading honesty.

The play partakes in a curious way of precisely the sordid quality of the thing it castigates—namely, tabloid journalism. Like the many "plays with a moral" which spend most of their time in a literal picturing of vice, "Five Star Final" is heavily salted and peppered with incidents, situations and wisecracks which appeal to the tabloid mind. Nevertheless, the honest anger of the author breaks through at frequent intervals with astonishing vigor. He lashes about him with a formidable whip. His stinging blows land where they should, and draw blood. If there were the least hope that many of the tabloid addicts in the audience would stop their daily contribution to the publishers' coffers, then the good in the play might outbalance the bad. But the instinct of self-defense works the other way.

Every one in an audience always hopes his neighbor will take the lesson to heart! In spite of Mr. Weitzenkorn's obvious intentions, "Five Star Final" probably succeeded entirely because it is, in itself, a breath from the tabloid composing rooms.

The acid story of this play concerns the owner and the managing editor of a New York tabloid, and the results which follow the former's decision to run a "human interest" serial on the present life of a woman who, twenty years earlier, killed a man for betraying her. This woman is now married. No one except her husband knows her identity. Her daughter is about to be married to a "worth-while" young man. But Hinchcliffe, the tabloid's owner, needs more circulation. By raking up the ashes of the old Voorhees case, he can—so he unctuously proclaims—point a moral for young and old alike. Randall, his managing editor, is getting a bit sick of the entire racket. But under Hinchcliffe's orders, he proceeds to set the machinery of exploitation to work. First he uncovers the present name and abode of Nancy Voorhees. Then he sends his "religious editor"—in the form of an ex-minister—on the trail, accompanied by a brisk girl reporter fresh from Chicago. They unearth the fact that Nancy's daughter is about to be married—whereupon the tabloid decides that it must point a further moral and show up the effort of an ex-murderess to palm off her daughter on an unsuspecting family. This news "breaks" the day before the wedding. Succinctly, it results in the suicide of both Nancy and her distracted husband.

This play has sufficient hot fury in its writing to merit fully the nomination it received from many for the year's Pulitzer Prize. Certainly the theme of the Roman holiday in crime and murder which the tabloids provide is handled with a bitter ferocity which does credit to the author's knowledge of his field.

### *The Criminal Code*

For obvious reasons, one can not group Martin Flavin's memorable play, "The Criminal Code," with "Broadway" or "The Front Page." In the one sense that it is a crusading play, it ranks with "Five Star Final." But the quality of the author's mind is such that he sinks much deeper into his material than the authors of most realistic melodramas. Flavin's writing has more inherent distinction than that of our journalist playwrights.

Martin Flavin's first bow to the theatre was through a serious and mordant play called "Children of the Moon." It did not score a commercial success, but has remained deeply engraved on the minds of steady theatre-goers as a work of considerable distinction. It dealt with the power of a selfish mother to distort the minds of those about her. "The Criminal Code" is quite understandable as a successor to "Children of the Moon"—utterly different in theme but displaying the same qualities of mind of the author. It is a play dealing with mental states and the distortions wrought through environment.

If one happens to have seen, many years ago, Galsworthy's play called "Justice," one will gather a good gen-

eral impression of the type of play to which "The Criminal Code" belongs. It jumps right into the middle of that vicious circle surrounding the criminal mind, and interprets the circle to you in terms of a young man wrongly convicted of second-degree murder. A prologue in the district attorney's office gives the first tragic premise—a lonely boy who defends a street walker from insults and in so doing accidentally kills the scion of a rich family. Robert Graham has nothing of the criminal in him—nothing, that is, beyond the normal human mixture of good and bad, with the bad under reasonably safe control. A good criminal lawyer could have secured a prompt acquittal. But Graham's employers lend him the services of their business attorney, a man as unfamiliar with criminal practice as a new-born babe. Martin Brady, the district attorney, faced by an approaching election, sets out to get, and does get, a conviction. Several years later, Brady is made warden of the state's prison where Graham is still serving his term. It is at this point that drama begins to stalk the stage.

Mr. Flavin has used many devices to heighten the points of his story—an interesting prison doctor to interpret Graham to us, Brady's daughter to warm the stone-gray prison into a place for romance, and a series of well drawn cross-section types within the walls, men who prey upon Graham's imagination in one way or another as the heavy years roll by. Drama quickly deepens into melodrama when the "criminal code" dictates that one of the inmates, a squealer, shall pay for his cowardice with his life. Graham has the bad luck to know who did the "killing." He is of-

ferred every inducement to tell, but, bound himself by the code of loyalty within the walls, remains silent. He is put in the dungeon and tortured. He does not know that the warden has his parole ready, nor that Brady, moved at last by the discovery that his daughter is in love with Graham (who has acted as the family chauffeur) is ready to forego forcing a confession. Crazy by hunger, torture and the phantoms conjured in his brain through long years, Graham murders the guard who has tortured him, not knowing that this same man has now come to set him free. The irony of the "bad break." Too late. Like the tolling of an old cracked bell—too late, too late.

It is a play that holds and fascinates with grim determination. It is a play abounding with pity, understanding and a fine indignation at the rigidity of human legal codes, at the clanking, crushing machinery of the law driven by the selfish actions of small-minded men. But it is not, in spite of all this, a great play. It has too many glaring defects, especially as seen in retrospect. The "bad breaks" are too often of the author's own making—happenings that are not really inherent in any of the situations. At other times, sheer coincidence plays too big a part. And in the final episodes, it is always painfully evident that Robert's confession is not the only way in which the prison murderer might be brought to justice. The warden, already somewhat conscience-stricken at the part he played earlier in Robert's life, would, one feels, have exhausted all the detective talents of the state before throwing the boy into the dungeon or trying to make him turn traitor to his

fellow prisoners. No real effort is ever made to discover the identity of the murderer except through Robert. In other words, one feels that Mr. Flavin saw his ending before he began his play, and allowed nothing to stand in its way. The play thus suffers badly from forced situations, and also from patent theatricality.

Of simple detective and mystery plays, we have had a full quota every season, including such classics as "The Bat," and "The Cat and the Canary." But I rather imagine that two of the more recent ones will serve for some time to stimulate authors with a particular bent in this direction. One, "The Trial of Mary Dugan" is distinguished for its excellent technical construction and its substitution of mental for physical "action." The other, "Subway Express," depends to a high degree upon the perfection of the mechanical details of stage setting, but is also an exceptionally well constructed play.

### *The Trial of Mary Dugan*

In "The Trial of Mary Dugan," Bayard Veiller, the author of "Within the Law" and "The Thirteenth Chair," once more demonstrated his splendid sense of the theatre. This time he did rather more than write a good play. He accomplished what very few dramatists could hope to do—he created absorbing theatrical entertainment with no other machinery or action than that found in a court room during a murder trial. When the audience enters the theatre, the stage is already set to represent a session of the Court, and long before the play begins, scrub-women,

policemen, reporters and other court hangers-on, wander about the scene in the desultory manner so familiar to any one who has served on a jury trial. The gradual darkening of the house lights is the only indication that the play is about to begin. The audience itself represents the jury box.

With this novel beginning, the action of the play picks up quickly and holds with great intensity to the last moment. The break between acts is handled quite naturally through two adjournments of the court forced by incidents in the trial itself. The defendant in this case is one Mary Dugan, recently of the "Follies," who is alleged to have stabbed and killed Edgar Rice, a man politely referred to by one of the witnesses as her "sugar daddy." The way in which the dramatic action develops through the unexpected revelations of several of the witnesses is a masterpiece of stage technique. And the moment at which Mary's brother, Jimmie Dugan, discharges her attorney and takes the case into his own hands is one not easily forgotten.

There is only one dramatic fault to find with this play and that is its obvious effort to sentimentalize the character and past life of Mary Dugan herself. There are moments when one fears that her entire career will be painted in a rosy glow of wronged innocence. Mr. Veiller, however, comes very near to saving the situation when he has Mary Dugan admit that luxuries could after a time become almost necessities in one's life. But there is very little in the story to match the relentless candor of such a character as Madame X.

*Subway Express*

"Subway Express," by Eva Kay Flint and Martha Madison, remains to the present the best constructed and the most ingenious and novel murder mystery of our current stage. It is the kind of play that makes its novelty serve a genuine dramatic purpose (as distinct from novelty for its own sake) and that mixes all its elements of humor, horror and suspense with an almost infallible sense of fine theatre. It creates and maintains its illusion throughout.

The entire action of "Subway Express" takes place in a New York north-bound subway car. A man is murdered before your eyes. Yet you not only fail to see who murdered him, but discover in time that he was not murdered by the shot you saw fired but in another way and several minutes before the shot itself. Thirty or forty people were in the car at the time. A police detective boards the train, and, as it speeds on its way uptown, begins to unravel the amazing events. Never do you lose the sense of the crowd and the interplay of emotions under stress, with minor characters touched off here and there in instantaneously revealing lines and actions. As a background to all this, you have the mechanical perfection of a setting which not only gives you the realistic interior of a subway car, but provides all the illusion of motion, of jolting halts, of stops at stations and of resumed pace. The ending, which shows that the victim was murdered by electrocution, is a bit complex, but is handled with compensating skill.

After all is said and done, however, I revert to "The

Tavern" as representing more of what American authorship is capable of creating than all of the journalistic and mystery melodramas combined. "The Tavern" has sheer wizardry and poetry as well. I am waiting and hoping for the day in the next decade when some of its magic will reappear in another form.

## CHAPTER IX

### WE LOOK ABROAD

IN tracing, through a few notable examples, the converging power and growing mastery of American playwrights, I have never, inwardly at least, lost sight of the richness with which our stage has been endowed by foreign authors. However, I cheerfully admit a deeper interest in the literary and dramatic forces generating directly beneath the surface life of America—not, I hope, in any spirit of rampant national prejudice, but rather because of the world conditions which make the American scene what it is, a high and spirited adventure. That aftermath of a great transplanting of young men to the east, into an older civilization, and then back again, which I have likened to the aftermath of the thirteenth century crusades in France, is simply an objective fact which is not duplicated in the European scene.

It is not that America is better or more important as a literary scene than Europe, but rather that it is utterly different—different not only in temperament and impulse, but different also in the sense that there has been nothing like it since the dawn of Christendom. Even thirteenth century France was not a recent wilderness that had been peopled by migration. Rome fought, conquered

and assimilated the Gauls. The Frankish invasions brought an infiltration of new blood. But the Franks were never the pioneer occupants of new soil. The American scene today is the more interesting not solely as viewed by an American but even more as viewed by a European or an Asiatic. Ultimately peoples and nations are known by their poets—as Greece by its Homer, Rome by its Virgil, Italy by its Dante, France by its Racine and Corneille and later by its Hugo, England by its Shakespeare and Milton and Shelley, in its romantic days by its Tennyson and in its imperial days by its Kipling. Germany nearly conquered the world by its Schiller and Goethe—yes, and Wagner. The prophetic insight of the poets reveals what the bombast and hypocrisy and deliberate purpose of politicians conceals. The poets of the American theatre, then, achieve an importance beyond their personal worth. They reveal the inwardness of the American scene, and because that scene is in itself one of the most astounding and bewildering in recorded history, they share whatever it holds of import to older parts of the world. They hold the same kind of attention as the emerging poets of Soviet Russia.

But the moment we turn from this deeper source of interest, we find the modern American theatre a world institution, welcoming the make-believe of all lands, laughing at the clowns of France or at the clowns of China, weeping with heroines of Scandinavia or of England impartially, chuckling softly at the witticisms of Vienna one night and of Budapest the next, or gulping with equally sentimental joy over the Cinderellas of Warsaw and Ash-

tabula. Playwrights are profoundly national, but the American theatre is magnificently of the world.

It would be a glamorous adventure, if space permitted, to peer into the heart of each nation through its playwrights. But I must choose another kind of adventure. In the first place, I must limit this backward glance to plays that have actually been produced and revived on our own stage in recent years. The theme of this book is our changing theatre. It concerns that particular living thing linked up with the American hunger for illusion. In the second place, one could not pretend to scan plays as national expressions without dedicating at least one heavy volume to each important nationality. The second part of this book, then, must follow, and more briefly, somewhat the same rough pattern as the first part—that is, in grouping plays according to the character of their themes—but without special attention to the nationality of authors. Moreover, I shall be irreverent enough to place next to each other certain revivals of plays that are, or threaten to become, classics, and other dramatic adventures which are wholly new. I feel sure that Ibsen would not object to the neighborly shoulders of Shaw, just as I am certain that Sophocles would be pleasantly intrigued by the proximity of Franz Werfel. A play is not a play at all—it is merely a manuscript—until it has an audience. Whatever provocative changes are taking place in our theatre are reflected in the plays actually produced, whether written in Periclean Greece or Georgian England. The theatre of the bookshelf is an academic myth. The theatre which vibrates to

a living audience is a reality—even if it is made real only to create unreality and illusion. It is this living American theatre which I have tried to describe first in terms of its native authors. I shall try now to describe it in terms of a few—a very few!—of the authors it has imported—the dead, the living and the not quite dead.

To keep the outlines of the pattern clear, I shall recall a few of the notable lyric tragedies first, then a few of those without song; after that a scattering of comedies, a few semi-serious dramas which penetrate the fogs, and a few which do not. If the result appears at first to be a jumble of ancient and modern, of English, Spanish, Italian, Norwegian and Russian, please remember that the solvent for this mixture is to be found in our contemporary audiences. These plays are nearly all candidates for the repertory of little theatre groups and in this sense quite as much alive as if they were to be seen any night on Broadway, or in Chicago or San Francisco. In one or two cases only, I have included plays which have obviously gone to limbo—but in each case because that particular play illustrates some point of playwriting technique or of theme which might be helpful to any dyed-in-the-wool theatregoer. In commenting on certain revivals, I have thought it well worth while to mention characteristics of those particular productions. In many cases, the mood or tempo or some special character interpretation in a standard play can wholly alter the emphasis of the theme. Moreover, revivals grow strangely “from precedent to precedent,” more often than not gathering beauty and grace. .

## CHAPTER X

### WHEN EUROPE SINGS

#### *Journey's End*

ONE of the few great lyric plays to emerge from England in recent years is "Journey's End," by R. C. Sheriff. Possibly a truly great play does not depend for its magic upon an audience's intimate association with some specific event of history. I am inclined to think that in spite of the proportions which the great war assumes in "Journey's End," the play itself passes beyond the limitations of time, place and individual circumstance and enters rightfully into the company of the few masterpieces of the last decade.

It is quite true that it evokes haunting memories, all too recent; true, also, that some of its force centers in one's consciousness of its truth. Those who have lost dear friends in the war, and above all those who have lost sons or brothers, can not but be stirred beyond the mere anguish of the dramatic situation. It all has an uncanny immediacy which lends it an overtone of reality, as if one's own memories were being reënacted. We must allow for all this in appraising the play. Yet, when every last measure of personal emotion has been granted, "Journey's End" remains somehow a thing of worth and tragic beauty and poetic valor in its own right—the portrait of men who are uni-

versal and therefore of all times, the story of a valiant fight between fear and relentless duty such as men must wage so long as hate breaks forth between nations; above all a supreme struggle to retain—rather than go mad—some of the human proportions of life in the midst of organized butchery. These British officers in the dugout before St. Quentin are not the heroes of legend who “face death with a smile.” On the contrary, they face it with sheer terror, sometimes in an agony of protest, but so concealed under the mask of determination that at times they almost deceive themselves by laughing, or by the hurried exchange of commonplaces which are no longer commonplace simply because you realize—(and so do they)—that such phrases may rise to the dignity and the awful finality which invest the last words of men.

The key to such tragedies as “Journey’s End” may be found, I think, in the sheer power of their mature restraint. They are lyric less by what they say than by what they evoke. Their poetry lies wholly within the theme and the characters selected to illuminate that theme. A lesser artist than Mr. Sheriff would have become self-conscious and in so doing would have lost that austerity which gives majestic beauty to the imminence of death.

We have had, in fact, a particularly apt example of lesser artistry in a play from Italy—Alberto Cassella’s “Death Takes a Holiday.” It has no remote resemblance, of course, to the Sheriff play, but its theme does concern the ultimate nature of death, and although primarily fantasy, it is meant to be both tragic and lyric in its implications. Where it

fails to achieve greatness is precisely in the author's marked self-consciousness.

*Death Takes a Holiday*

In idea and in execution, "Death Takes a Holiday" manages to present a novel thought with an unexpected sense of reality. It is only in the closing moments of the last act that its fabric of invention grows thin and its central idea fails to mature completely.

Imagine, if you can, a moment in time when Death, belonging to the world of eternity, becomes curious to know why mortals fear him and cling to life. Imagine, further, that to satisfy his curiosity he decides to take a holiday and to assume human form for three days and to subject himself to human appetites and emotions. During the period of this holiday, nothing dies. The processes of decay are halted. No leaves wither and fall. No accidents happen. It is a sort of concentrated springtime. And during this springtime, Death learns the meaning of human love. He begins to understand at last why humans fear him, why they grow attached to familiar objects, and why the parting with loved ones seems unendurable. In spite of this, Death remains puzzled to the end, for he knows that eternal life is so much simpler than temporal life.

Whether or not you regard this as a morbid tale (because a young girl at last consents to go off with Death) depends on how far you accept the author's premise that life at best is but a transient and painful existence, compared to which eternal life should be the mystic goal of all.

The conspicuous missing link in this chain of fantastic tragedy is, of course, the absence of all concept of God in reference to eternal life. There have been saints aplenty who have prayed for death as the moment when the only true life would begin. But this is in the positive terms of seeking the vision and the love of God. Either the author or Walter Ferris the adapter (it is quite impossible to tell which) has preferred to beg the question by a sort of vague doctrine of "wish fulfilment." Nor has he even partly compensated for this, as he might easily have done, by making Death, in the last few moments of revelation, a brilliant figure of deliverance, in contrast to man's everyday sinister illusion. That is where invention fails in the last act. If the audience could be, so to speak, let in on the secret, and permitted to see Death at the last as the young girl herself must have seen him, then the author's idea would have reached full maturity, and one would have felt almost ready to pity the other characters on the stage, to whom Death still remained a symbol of horror.

### *Michael and Mary*

By including such a play as "Death Takes a Holiday" among the tragedies we have drawn from Europe, I am guilty, perhaps, of discarding again all hard and fast definitions, but since I am quite unwilling to accept all tragic themes as gloomy, and do believe that many of them can and do possess triumphant beauty, I see no reason why a play dealing with the choice of life or death should not come within the tragic mood, even if it is moulded as an

apparently light fantasy. For analogous reasons, there are thoroughly tragic implications in many a play that has nothing to do with death. Mere moral catastrophe is often tragic. In this sense, A. A. Milne, who can be the lightest and fluffiest and most whimsical of writers, has given us thoroughly tragic theme material in "Michael and Mary." It never quite attains the lyric note, yet it is so obviously written in the spirit of courageous (if mistaken) struggle, that it belongs among the finer plays of the English stage.

"Michael and Mary" has some startlingly good scenes and many sensitive moments, interspersed with a good deal that borders on the trite in dramatic situation—and a good deal that comes dangerously close to the saccharine philosophy that "love is all that matters"—meaning, of course, that the play stirs your sympathies deeply for deeds and decisions which are essentially wrong.

The Greek influence is, I believe, important in estimating this play—that doctrine of retribution upon which Greek tragedy is built, and which was to find its only solution in the deeper understanding bestowed by Christianity—the possibility of the forgiveness of the guilt of sin without, however, escape from the temporal punishment which might be its due. "Michael and Mary" is essentially a Greek tragedy, ending in that (to the Greeks) insoluble conflict between mistaken deed and its retribution. Because of the very tenderness and humanity with which it is written, it is a play of misleading values—exaggerated in its premises and never more than half true in its con-

clusions. More things than human love must count if life is to reveal its richest mysteries and its compelling truth.

### *The Dybbuk*

Against the tragedies of realistic heroism such as "Journey's End" or the intimate tragedies of small lives, such as "Michael and Mary," we have been fortunate in witnessing at least one superb tragedy of pure mysticism. I refer to Ansky's "The Dybbuk," first produced in this country by the artists of New York's Neighborhood Playhouse and later given elsewhere. David Vardi directed both productions, and to him must go the major credit for making this one of the outstanding plays of a decade. Curiously enough—from the view of Broadway managers—it was also a resounding theatrical success.

"The Dybbuk" is based upon a mystical legend among a sect of Jews in southeastern Europe that the soul of a departed mortal may return and inhabit the body of one still living. Leah, the daughter of a self-righteous man, is given in marriage to a man she does not love. The student whom she really loves dies of grief. As a punishment to Leah's parents his spirit returns and inhabits Leah's body. The culmination of the play is the scene of exorcism, during which the High Priest drives out the offending spirit. Leah is saved—but only to hear the voice of her lover calling, and to join him in death.

In no play that I have ever witnessed—thanks to the perfection of Vardi's work—has the sense of supernatural

presence so completely dominated stage and audience alike. In a later revival, however, which copied every detail of Vardi's direction, but without the benefit of his personal supervision, much of this illusion had disappeared.

### *The Sophocles Electra*

The three people who have done the most in the American theatre to enliven the spirit of classic tragedy—aside from the Neighborhood Playhouse group—are Margaret Anglin, Walter Hampden and Eva Le Gallienne. Each has succeeded, through one or more revivals, in restoring the native splendor and beauty to classics that were languishing in mediocrity. Margaret Anglin's production of the Sophocles "Electra," Walter Hampden's "Cyrano" (and in lesser degree, but for a special reason, his "Hamlet") and Eva Le Gallienne's "Juliet" and "Camille" form an imperishable quintette of memories. To leave them out of the record would be to forget entirely what the creative impulse of today can and does draw from the finest traditions of the past.

Miss Anglin has given her "Electra" many times in this country, but the first time I was privileged to see it was in a special performance at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. There were moments during that performance when the veil seemed to be lifted before the shrine of greatness—moments when, in the words of Gilbert Gabriel, then dramatic critic of the New York Sun, one entered the presence of "a horror as hot and beautiful and unapproachable as fire itself." Something greater than the

actress herself was astir, something ageless in the human soul, the summation of the crucifying torture to which man can be put when torn between seemingly irresistible forces. At these moments, Margaret Anglin ceased to exist for herself. Sorrow mounted through her, like the notes of a great composer reborn through a matchless instrument, and passed from her to those who watched and trembled.

On the whole, Miss Anglin chose wisely in selecting the austere tragedy of Sophocles rather than the more realistic and humanized version of Euripides. The Sophocles play moves in more direct dramatic lines. Yet even so, one wishes that Miss Anglin could act both versions. There is, first of all, an essential difference between Sophocles and Euripides which places the latter even closer to modern understanding. Sophocles is calmer, more absorbed in the general majesty of his theme and less alive to the anguish of soul of his characters. It is in this sense that his spirit is more classic. Euripides found himself more in rebellion against the anthropomorphic gods of Greece. He resented the impossible situations in which they were supposed to place human beings. For this reason, if for no other, he throws into sharper relief that conflict of obligations which becomes the core of nearly every Greek tragedy.

It is really only in the writings of Euripides that we begin to feel the indecision and frailty of human nature, the sense of subjective torture which reached its height in "Hamlet." In Sophocles, it is at the behest or command of

a god that humans are charged with fulfilling a vengeance, and these commands are accepted and obeyed implicitly, the tragedy gathering force from the very helplessness of the human instruments involved. The tragedy of a typical Greek hero, called upon to perform a deed of horror, has almost nothing in common with the introspection, the hesitancy or the fateful decision of Hamlet. The responsibility rests outside of the character himself; the tragedy lies in the punishment heaped upon him for a deed done against his own desire.

### *An Heroic Hamlet*

In "Hamlet," Walter Hampden has given us an heroic and triumphant figure rather than the tragedy of an enchained will. One has the sense of seeing something very rich and startling and new. This "Hamlet" is one of the most important revivals of recent years because it is not presented as a tragedy of defeat.

As one recalls in memory interpretations such as Forbes-Robertson's perturbed scholar, or John Barrymore's brilliant neurotic, or Basil Sydney's repressed and explosive, though highly effective, avenger (in modern clothes), or scans the long tradition built up by the older tragedians, there is a singular persistency in the idea that Hamlet remains defeated to the end. Doctor Samuel Johnson was so puzzled by the complexities of Hamlet's character that he frankly gave his preference to the far simpler tragedy of "Othello." Even Goethe insists on the moral tragedy of

"Hamlet." Yet Mr. Hampden, braving the bulwarks of tradition, has found a different meaning and has substantiated it so well by his use of texts generally omitted, that one feels, at his performance, a sense of glorious discovery, and the conviction that here, at last, is the theme which resolves what older critics have always called the contradictions of Hamlet's character.

As Mr. Hampden plays it, there is no indecision after the playlet and after the completion of the evidence which Hamlet has been building up. Hamlet, with no question whatever, kills Polonious, thinking he is the king. Then Hampden reminds us, by the use of the complete text, that Hamlet is sent to England immediately upon the discovery of the body of Polonious—in other words, that Hamlet had no physical opportunity to carry out his vengeance on the king until his return from England "naked and alone," shorn of all weapons by the attack of the pirates. The scene at the grave thus assumes a new symbolic importance. Hamlet must go down into the grave himself (like Everyman after his pilgrimage) before the completion of his final act. The last scene of the duel "shuffles off the mortal coil" of the man whose life has now been dedicated. But in doing this, it achieves the redemption of his soul. There is a moment in the death of Hamlet—an unforgettable moment—when Mr. Hampden raises his eyes as if beholding a supernatural vision, holds up his hand as if yearning for final release, and then falls back—a spiritual conqueror.

*Camille*

Just as Hampden has evoked entirely new values in "Hamlet," so also has Miss Eva Le Gallienne given a totally new feeling to the creaking structure of "Camille." One has only to compare Miss Le Gallienne's "Camille" with the strident Comédie Française version of Cecile Sorel to understand the vast gulf which separates art from artifice. The death scene in "Camille" is usually a morbid and melancholy affair, in which a thin small voice and much gasping for breath make one long for a blessed release. Miss Le Gallienne has somehow made the whole act a rising note of triumph—from the quiet joy with which she speaks of the priest's visit the evening before to the moment (and this, I believe, is a new touch) when she takes Nichette's bridal bouquet and makes one feel, in this single gesture, that she is consecrating, before death, what has been till then her profane love.

*Romeo and Juliet*

Even more important, however, than Miss La Gallienne's personal achievement in "Camille" and the hint of spiritual values with which she endows that play, is the contribution which she and her Civic Repertory Company have made in giving all the glamor of a modern play to "Romeo and Juliet." Shakespeare's tragedies have suffered unspeakably in this country from well intentioned scholarship carried (where it does not belong) before the footlights. In every detail of production, Miss Le Gallienne

has endowed "Romeo and Juliet" with human richness, beauty, color and pulsating life. This is a performance which casts the true spell of the theatre, bringing out values of speech and action which are too easily lost in Shakespearean revivals, and suffusing the whole with the rare glamor of vibrant illusion.

Perhaps Miss Le Gallienne's own work is the more notable as Juliet because of its complete departure from most of her previous work in manner, diction, emotional force and even in make-up. For some years, Miss Le Gallienne had made it known in a quiet way that she was conscious of many acting limitations, and would not undertake certain parts until she felt entirely ready for them. This was a resolve which required much determination for an actor-manager to keep. But the result is little short of triumphant. Miss Le Gallienne emerges as a young, fresh, spontaneous Juliet, quivering with the yearning for love and romance, yet painfully conscious of the adverse forces working about her. She has all the beauty of adolescence and all the courage of awakening womanhood, abounding with life and love of life. Her tragedy is always that of youth, warm, impetuous and, in the end, almost selfless in its tender abandon.

As I said above, it is impossible, in discussing revivals of standard plays and classics, to avoid mentioning those features of production and acting which have been responsible for their success. Too frequently, important revivals fail because of the actors' approach to them or because of unimaginative or strictly traditional production details. Ameri-

can audiences are growing more and more impatient of anything which fails to achieve full illusion and living warmth. That is part of the significant change in our theatre. Because Miss Le Gallienne has caught the spirit of this change—this demand for a theatre of living dimensions, she has succeeded notably where others have failed. Margaret Anglin breathes similar life and hot fury into "Electra." Hampden lends a new heroism to "Hamlet" and yields his uttermost to the high romance of "Cyrano." There you have it—the theatre the modern world demands! In that spirit, lyric tragedy, whether classic or modern, American or foreign, has a secure place on our stage. Broadway does not quite understand this, having about the calibre of view of a factory superintendent. But the public does know, and quite clearly, what it wants. It wants the splendid sincerity of the old theatre and the old themes restated in fresh terms. It does not want trickery, nor frantic experiments, nor the moral anaemia of art for art's sake. It does want lyric beauty, whether in a "Journey's End" or in a "Hamlet," in a "Dybbuk" or in a "Juliet" transfigured by warm loveliness.

### *The Brothers Karamazov*

As a cogent example—and the last I shall use—of a European tragedy which, for all its brutal statement, carries the note of triumph, we were privileged to see a masterly production by the Theatre Guild of Dostoevsky's "Brothers Karamazov," as dramatized by Jacques Copeau. Only the last of five long acts seems to fall outside of the unity of

the piece and to meander into by-paths that lead to anticlimax. As a whole, this is probably one of the most absorbing and authentic dramas the American stage has brought from Europe in recent years.

It is rare that one feels in the short compass of a play the sweep and penetration, the symphonic quality, of a novel. But Copeau has captured just that quality. This is no commonplace tale, this story of the interaction of four male minds over-shadowed by the sinister reprobate who is their father. In the neurotic and fear-stricken Dmitri who achieves redemption, in the strong and patient soul of Aliocha the young priest, in the intellectual pride and atheism of Ivan, and in the epileptic degeneracy of Smerdiakov, the illegitimate brother, we have one of those amazing groups, occasionally found within one family, which seems to sum up all the conflicting elements of life, spiritual, physical and mental; running the gamut from exaltation to terror, from brave humility to diabolic pride. Throw such people together with their passions, their jealousies, their hopes and fears, their terror and hate and their loves, and what will happen? Drama, of course; but far more than drama, a picture of life forces struggling, swaying, despairing, praying; achievement, destruction, and beauty born from chaos. There are moments of mute horror in this play, moments like tempered steel, and again moments that rise to the tragic beauty of a moral crucifixion.

The play is not tragedy, perhaps, in the accepted sense, but it at least represents a magnificent outpouring of the tragic spirit in heroic mould.

## CHAPTER XI

### EUROPE'S TRAGEDIES WITHOUT HOPE

THE luxury of self-pity, or rather, the habit and the luxury, know no special national boundaries. But it is a matter of simple record that proportionately fewer lyric tragedies have come to us from Britain and the Continent than plays of mordant self-analysis or of exhausting futility. The American theatre has found place for both kinds, with an impartiality that would be highly discouraging if it were not offset by the more robust character of our native drama. In a period of transition and confusion, both artistic and moral, our audiences are not always alert to the distinction between the beauty of words and the inner beauty of ideas. Moreover, for want of better serious material, they give full credit, where so much is due, to the powerful and sincere statement of a philosophy even of despair.

Sometimes, of course, a certain spurious glamor will carry an impossible play to success. It may be the glamor of a European literary reputation, or nothing more substantial than the transitory glamor of a particular actor or actress. The readiest examples of success based on this brand of audience snobbishness are Vicki Baum's "Grand Hotel," Arlen's "The Green Hat," Maugham's "The Letter" and Galsworthy's "Old English" and "Escape." These

thoroughly unhappy plays have met, it seems to me, a very different type of response from the more authentic tragedies of the Russians and of Ibsen, and even of Noel Coward.

### *Old English*

In the case of the two Galsworthy plays, we have at least material and literary quality of distinction, things not to be found in "The Green Hat" or "The Letter." I am seldom, if ever, happy over a Galsworthy play, and my chronic malaise reached an acute state in the case of these two plays. "Old English," of course, is inextricably wrapped up with George Arliss's acting. It is only fair, then, to separate three important matters—the play as a dramatic theme—its literary quality as a portrait—and the personal character creation of Arliss.

The play itself is one of those sad efforts to oversentimentalize a perverse character. Old Sylvanus Heythorp has been something of a rascal all his life. In the play some one refers to him as "pagan," but I always revolt interiorly at the misuse of a word which stands for so many noble traditions of human reason—from Homer to Virgil. Why not say "immoral," and be done with it? Old Heythorp has been distinctly immoral and takes a sneaking pride in the fact. He closes his business career by a dishonorable act performed in the interest of his illegitimate grandchildren. Galsworthy's objective is apparently to show that in spite of his faults, the old man has a lot of good in him—a soft spot for his granddaughter, for ex-

ample. This, to my mind, is one of the most discouraging forms of sentimentalism. When you have thought so little of your dependents during your life that you have curbed none of your impulses in order to provide for them, why is it particularly good-hearted to steal for them when the shadow of death begins to hover about? You are really being kinder to yourself than to them—attempting to grease your own way into eternity with the thought that you have eaten your entire cake and have still left a big slice for some one else. No. As a play, in which the guiding hand of the author is always visible, “Old English” walks on the left foot. Its purpose is tainted. Its entire effect is to condone those very actions and motives which underlie most of the moral tragedies of life. Even the seventeen-year-old granddaughter is commandeered for this purpose—quite delighted in the discovery that her old “guardian” is really her grandfather. The moral of the play is perverted in its entire emphasis.

As a portrait, it is much better. If Mr. Galsworthy did not try too hard to make you sympathize with the old reprobate, you would say that he had done a masterpiece—the summing up in a few revealing incidents of all the ugliness of a completely self-indulgent life—a life whose moments of kindness, even, spring from a weak desire to be loved by a limited few about him, and from the inflation of having others depend on him.

It was in bringing this portrait to reality that Mr. Arliss did a remarkable bit of acting—remarkable, not so much for its broader strokes, which are fairly obvious, as for the

finer shades of pantomime. But even Arliss can not make the epicure's last meal seem anything more than it is, deliberate suicide to evade his threatened loss of personal independence.

### *Escape*

In "Escape," Galsworthy again garnished what might have been a fine play with the same brand of false and cheap sentimentality that pervaded "Old English." In purely theatrical terms, "Escape" made an exceedingly tense story of the attempted escape of a rather romantic convict, and of his ultimate voluntary surrender when he finds what his concealment would cost one of his generous protectors.

In a prologue we see Matt Denant rushing to the defense of a street walker whom a plain clothes man has caught plying her trade in Hyde Park. The detective accidentally hits his head in falling against a railing, and is killed. Denant, refusing to run away, is arrested and sent up for manslaughter. The rest of the ten episodes are taken up with his attempt at escape. The people he runs into are evidently intended to portray the gamut of human types. Of each type Mr. Galsworthy seems to ask the question, "If you were to meet an escaped convict, concerning whose imprisonment there might be some injustice, what would you do? Turn him over to the authorities or speed him on his way?"

Now, some of the people the convict meets have a clear recollection of the circumstances of his conviction, but

others are entirely ignorant of them. They can not possibly know of his innocence. Yet Mr. Galsworthy has so carefully engaged the sympathy of his audience for Matt Denant that the natural tendency is to applaud his rescuers or helpers and to despise, as unthinking bigots, all those who try to send him back to prison. This, I believe, is the essential falsity of Mr. Galsworthy's technique. It is a form of literary special pleading which is just as vicious in its way as pretending that all heroes are angels with spotless wings, and all villains black monsters with split hoofs. To stick to purely literary standards, it is a sin against the integrity of characterization. It partakes of trickery and is essentially dishonest.

Another play with grotesquely unsatisfactory theme, but with far deeper sincerity than the Galsworthy, Arlen and Maugham plays, is "Grand Hotel" by Vicki Baum.

### *Grand Hotel*

Those who constantly chant the theme song that only sordid plays succeed will probably point to "Grand Hotel" as proving their case, since the play undoubtedly contains large batches of gross and sensual material and concerns a group of people not one of whom has an ideal or a thought transcending earthly pleasures or vices. Yet I firmly believe that the very real excitement and intensity of interest which the play creates is due to the excellence of its sharp and swift writing, to the admirable suspense of its many situations, to finely drawn characterization and

to the superb handling which complicated production details received in the American version.

I come back, in other words, to the principle that under present conditions of moral confusion, plays succeed primarily through the excellence of the illusion they create and maintain, and only in a secondary sense because of the material they use. One can summon countless illustrations to support this view. "The Shanghai Gesture," for example, was an excellent melodrama. Obviously its sordid material was a successful "bait" for those who like to experience vice by proxy. But many other plays with equally obnoxious material have failed promptly. On the other side, you have such plays as "Holiday," whose care-free nonsense and complete innocence of material promised little or nothing to the lovers of the exotic and erotic. It was a notable success—assuredly because it was a good play, splendidly produced. Neither the "clean plays" with Polyanna material nor the sordid plays owe their success chiefly to the material used. The quality of the play itself—as a play—is the determining factor. This may be less true in the period ahead of us, for there is a notable reaction toward poetic truth after our surfeit of photographic realism. But, whether you like it or not, it is true today. If "Grand Hotel" had been written around an entirely different and sympathetic group of people and on a theme of some spiritual discernment, it would have been equally successful if it had still maintained its quick and sure craftsmanship, its fine sense of proportion and its general intelligence of casting and production. This general point, I believe, should be made

very clear because of its important bearing on many current obscurities about stage censorship.

"Grand Hotel" concerns the lives of an oddly assorted group of people in one of Berlin's large hostelrys during a period of thirty-six hours. Now, the interesting thing to note is that each of these characters has, as a life principle, a distinct and undiluted hedonism. There is no study here of vaulting ambition, nor of lust for power. The idea that life, to have any meaning, must yield pleasure dominates the play and its characters. Even money, for these people, is purely a means to an end. And that end is self-indulgence.

It is much better to admit that each of these characters fails before any real test, that the play in this sense is true to life, but not to all of life, and therefore not true realism. You are left with the impression that suffering has little or no value, that the things to be prized are the pleasures and comforts to be purchased or begged or stolen or wrung from a pitiless fate, and that no one has the moral courage from which the spirit of resurrection is generated. Many things are presented as pathetic circumstances whereas they are really pathetic only in the confusion of moral values and in the lack of inner strength they portray.

In commenting on the "moods" of authors, I laid considerable emphasis on the fact that the creative artist, especially when writing tragedy, finds himself limited by his own psychological conflicts of the moment. Thus an author of the finest perceptions and sincerity may often write a

play of cramped and futile or unhealthy theme. Some of his most superb writing and characterization may go into just such a play, lending it the hue of poetic thought without the inner substance. I can not recollect a better case of this framework without inner substance than "Grand Hotel."

### *Melo*

The French theatre has not been conspicuously stimulating during the last decade. Its plays, for the most part, have remained neatly pigeon-holed according to accepted types. They have probably been better written than the mass of American plays, but they have been far less daring in the effort to create new conventions and to establish new powers of creating illusion. This much, however, one can unreservedly say for the French—and this applies to audiences as well as to playwrights—that they know how to keep farce, comedy and tragedy distinct. When they throw decency to the winds, it is generally in the spirit of broad farce, without any spill-over into the realm of sentimental comedy. In comedy, they do not pretend, as their American copyists do, that life has no responsibilities, and that consequences need never be faced. Many of the themes of American comedy become, under the wise and clear vision of the French, stories of tragic conclusion, following a pattern woven by the experience of life itself. This is the case with Henri Bernstein's "Melo."

"Melo" is constructed around the everlastingly familiar

triangle of a husband and wife and the husband's best friend, but finds generous enrichment in the careful development of character, in the things that are conveyed rather than spoken, and in an inexorable logic which brings every thought and action to an issue and a conclusion.

There is another sharp and interesting distinction between this all too familiar theme as Bernstein handles it and as the majority of our own playwrights would treat it. Bernstein's characterization goes straight to universals, to essentially feminine and masculine qualities. He wastes little or no time in trying to "place" his characters within any particular environment. For that very reason they stand out clearly as individuals rather than as types. By giving us only the essentials, Bernstein makes them count doubly as the marks of individual souls facing, and failing to meet, a simple test of loyalties.

It is, of course, the Russian writers, as a group, who, for all their use of feeling rather than logic, most resemble the relentless honesty of the French. The Germans, as in the example of "Grand Hotel," are either too harsh to strike universals, or, as in Hasenclever's "Beyond" and Chlumberg's elephantine "Miracle at Verdun," are too deeply involved in their own emotions to retain objective proportion. The Russians, too, are inclined to see too little of the roundness and balance of life, but what they do see they have the power of conveying with astounding integrity and rich feeling.

*At the Bottom*

The American stage has been singularly fortunate in the number of recent revivals of classic Russian plays. A particularly interesting experiment was a new translation by William L. Laurence of Maxim Gorky's "A Night's Lodging," re-christened "At the Bottom," and revived by that masterly director and actor, Leo Bulgakov.

"At the Bottom"—which is only one of many titles this play has enjoyed—catches, in amazing fashion, the vagabondage of the world. It takes, above all, those who have descended from higher estate, until, weary and broken, they accept the life of those dismal retreats where a night's lodging can be had for the fruit of a day's begging, sewing or pocket-picking. It might easily be a gloomy picture, were it not for the rich variety of characterization with which Gorky illuminates the scene. In it you have color aplenty, loud, rough humor, cold cynicism, pathos, simplicity, and the splendor of futile dreams.

*The Sea Gull*

Bulgakov also revived Chekov's sensitive poem of despair, "The Sea Gull." Later, Miss Le Gallienne did the same. It is not an easy play to describe in terms of plot, chiefly because its primary interest lies in character and in the significant use of detail. It is a bit of life on a Russian country estate surveyed with all that rich, dark pity of which Chekov is capable, pity for aspiration unfulfilled,

pity for impulses only half understood, pity for the twilight because it must give way to night, and pity for the cool dawn because it must soon melt under a burning noon. Like so much of his writing, and like so much of the work of the general Russian school it represents, "The Sea Gull" lacks the accented note of resurrection necessary to give it completion and full universality. To this extent the charge of morbidity would be justified, as it so often is in literature, not by the mere presence of introspection or unhappiness but by the essential lack of that balance to be found in all nature. I have just mentioned pity for the twilight and the dawn because those figures of speech help to illustrate this point. If we could set a term to nature—that is, if we knew that a particular dawn was the last dawn of the world, or a particular twilight was the last twilight—we might indeed pity both moments as moods about to perish. But in the recurrent cycle of the day, we know that tomorrow's dawn may be even more enthralling than today's, and that twilight sinking into the assuaging depth of night is the symbol of rest before new creation.

The prevailing mood of "The Sea Gull," a mood indicated by a hundred little touches of character or irony, is on the side of exaggerated compassion and of that slow mental disease which we call self-pity. This tendency, and this alone, prevents it from being what it might easily have been—as complete and engrossing a study of human conflict as you are apt to find in the near-classic theatre.

One might glance at other Russian tragedies, such as

Tolstoi's "The Living Corpse" (or, more euphoniously, "Redemption") or Andreyev's "Katerina" or the same author's "Waltz of the Dogs." But I feel that in many ways both the beauties and the defects of "The Sea Gull" give the key to this whole group of writers—at least in their tragic moods. They see life minutely and at the same time richly, but without that brilliant illumination of the truly great poets. They fall midway between the bleak grayness of Ibsen and the glorious completeness of Shakespeare.

Ibsen, on the recent American stage, holds the unique position of being the most frequently played of all the standard authors. The Actors' Theatre, in its bright days, and Miss Le Gallienne have carried the chief burden of Ibsen revivals, although Miss Blanche Yurka, with her amazing powers of intellectual and emotional interpretation, has frequently joined in this distinguished company, as also The Stagers, a promising producing group that was unable to weather financial storms.

Of Ibsen's many tragedies, one, at least, demands little attention, except from students of dramatic form. That one is "Ghosts," a tragedy so painfully subservient to a quasi-medical theory of inheritance that it is useful chiefly as a vehicle for star actresses—including Mrs. Fiske, who gives the character of Mrs. Alving the nearest thing possible in an Ibsen tragedy to a grain of saving humor. For the rest, the play belongs in a clinic of the nineteenth century.

In fact, I may as well admit that no amount of drenching in Ibsen can convince me that he was a truly great play-

wright, no matter how forceful his craftsmanship. His range of interest was too confined to problems of pride in one form or another. He lacked the quality which sets genius on the works of Shakespeare—that is, a universal sensitiveness to all forms of human emotion. He was, essentially, a man imprisoned within the walls of his own personal obsessions, unable to reach out and understand problems differing from his own. Shakespeare could write of three such totally different personalities as Hamlet, Macbeth and Othello, all within the bounds of tragedy, not to mention his flights into pure romance or slapstick comedy. Can we imagine Ibsen creating a Romeo, a Falstaff, and a Malvolio?

### *The Master Builder*

Ibsen's theme of pride is particularly blatant in "The Master Builder" (one of Miss Le Gallienne's Ibsen repertory). In this case it is fear-stricken pride before a fall, and lest any one should miss the moral, the fall is made literal in the last act, when Halvard Solness falls from the tower on which he has just placed a wreath. It is also a play illustrating what the modern psychologists would call the power of the idea to realize itself, for good or evil. But the theme and its illustration are so painfully obvious throughout that we hear the machinery of plot squeaking. We are always conscious of the labor of intention and are never carried away by the surge of inspiration. When young Hilda Wangel comes into the home and life of Solness and his embittered wife, one almost expects to see

a printed label on her back, with the words: "This is my old pride of youth come back to me."

The theme of pride shifts slightly to that of self-love in "Hedda Gabler"—a play that has had several distinguished revivals and is also in Miss Le Gallienne's repertory.

### *Hedda Gabler*

"Hedda Gabler" is a good actors' play—well constructed and with many declamatory moments. The self-loving lady whose name it bears has not a little in common with that other creation of feminine selfishness, "Craig's Wife." Put in the same position, they might conceivably react in very similar fashion—up to the point where Ibsen and Kelly follow separate roads. For Kelly is essentially an observer of outward facts and foibles, whereas Ibsen's characters spring right from his own inner nature and share both his strength and his great weaknesses. So it happens that when Hedda's plans crash about her, and life seems intolerable, she shoots herself, whereas Mrs. Craig scatters rose petals over the floor of her empty house while searching for truths that have never yet touched her.

Ibsen's dramatic power is so great that we often forget his intellectual and moral weaknesses. He shows neither the ability nor the desire to forge his way out of the intolerable situations he creates. He (as represented, of course, in his manifold characters) never discovers the meaning and the value of suffering—its creative possibilities, its power of purification, the resurrection it forecasts.

Take Hedda: her jealousy, her selfishness, her boredom, her love of power over others are all aspects of a supreme love of self. The one intolerable idea, for Hedda, is that any one should have the power to limit or constrain this self-love. Her suffering does not begin until she finds that Judge Brack has her in his power—that she must henceforth do, not what she wants, but as he wills. Here Hedda (or Ibsen) comes to an impasse. She does not search her soul to find the cause for her suffering. She has come as far as she can. This is the end—a blank wall ahead. Her suicide is only the outward—the objective—expression of her soul. She has no desire to plunge further into the mysteries of suffering. This is her moral weakness. She has no intellectual rumor, even, that a mystery exists into which she might plunge. This is her intellectual bankruptcy. In both aspects, the weaknesses are Ibsen's own.

For "Hedda Gabler" is not an isolated play. Examine the run of Ibsen's work. Either the characters themselves commit suicide when suffering hovers near, or Ibsen, through his plot, ducks the issue. In "Ghosts"—an expression of heredity, unanswered. In "The Doll's House"—a false attitude toward marriage, answered only by Nora's convenient exit. In "The Master Builder"—a problem of pride left unsolved by death. In "Rosmersholm"—a suicide. In "The Wild Duck"—suicide. Is it an exaggeration to call Ibsen—in spite of his technical skill in presenting a problem—the grand master of the defeatists? Heroic death carries with it the symbol of vast things beyond—such deaths as Hamlet's, or Cyrano's. A life of tragic suf-

fering carries the promise of ultimate redemption—as that of the blind Œdipus wandering outcast over the earth. But these are not the deaths nor the symbols of Ibsen. His do not inspire the sad exaltation of lyric tragedy, but only the bitterness of inglorious defeat.

### *The Wild Duck*

"The Wild Duck" is, of course, by far the most interesting tragedy Ibsen ever wrote—partly, I imagine, because of the curious mood which inspired it. We must remember that he was (in his own view of himself, at least) essentially a dramatist of revolt, stung to a crusading violence by the hypocrisies and intrenched illusions he saw in the life surrounding him. He made it his mission to show people to themselves as they were, to strip off their illusions, to puncture their smug self-satisfaction, and to offer them as an alternative his own ideals of marriage, candor, feminism and inner freedom. Like so many other crusading idealists, his enthusiasm often blinded him to the difference between truth and the appearance of truth. In his determination to destroy false appearances, he often killed the thing itself as well as its distortion, the substance as well as the sham and the hypocrisy. And his philosophic blindness became all the more terrifying because of his consummate mastery of the weapon he employed, the realistic theatre.

In such plays as "Ghosts" and "The Doll's House," he cut so deeply into sham that the living realities beneath also received deep wounds. In time a sense of his mistake

began to pervade him uneasily. He began to realize that the surgeon must learn the difference between the diseased tissue he cuts away and the vital tissue surrounding it. The revelation must have been a bitter disillusionment to him, for in his revulsion of mood, he wrote "The Wild Duck" as a trenchant and terrible satire on himself—a play in which a well meaning idealist, finding himself in surroundings of contentment sustained by certain illusions, proceeds clumsily to shatter those illusions in the hope of seeing a finer life rise from the ashes. To his horror and amazement, his "claim of the ideal" is above the heads of those with whose lives he tampers—so far above, that his efforts result only in the grimdest of tragedies and the suicide of an innocent girl. It is really the story of Ibsen's own lost ideal and his discovery that life has a reality of its own, far perhaps from the ideal, yet not without its strength and beauty and tenderness.

In the only important recent revivals, Blanche Yurka as the almost imperturbable Gina, practical and unimaginative, has made an incomparable foil to each of the other highly strung characters. On one memorable occasion, she was so fortunate as to have Tom Powers (the versatile creator of "Charley" in "Strange Interlude") as the overstrained and impetuous Gregers, and Helen Chandler, then hardly known to Broadway, as an ineffably lovely and pathetic Hedvig. Under the direction of Dudley Digges and the late Clare Eames, this particular revival, by the Actors' Theatre, still ranks historically as one of the few recent great events of the American theatre.

*Miracle at Verdun*

One might, for special reasons, extend the examples of imported tragedies of the song-less type to include Hans Chlumberg's massive and distorted play of the resurrected war-dead called "Miracle at Verdun" and also Maurice Browne's and Robert Nichols' thrillingly provocative play of possible world destruction, "Wings Over Europe." Both were Theatre Guild importations.

Chlumberg failed by making his play a treatise rather than drama, an angry explosion against things which deserve anger but are not bettered by explosions, particularly of the trite and uninspired kind. In brief, the war dead, whom Chlumberg summons from their graves to see what has happened to the world for which they died, are merely animated corpses—never immortal spirits.

Consider for a minute the basic idea—that by a miracle (which the authors thin out in the end to the tiny proportions of the conventional stage "dream") the 30,000,000 war dead are brought back from their graves. Do they find the world any better for their sacrifice? Does the world really want them to come back? Suppose one goes a step further with the author and admits fully that the war was a ghastly futility, that new wars are already in the making, that politicians are still governing the affairs of men, that the very homes which have mourned the dead have become so adjusted to other ways that the dead would be actually unwelcome. Widows have remarried, impoverished homes can only feed the living mouths, a world

suffering from unemployment does not know what to do with 30,000,000 more men. These rather brutal facts, which are the only things Chlumberg can envision, do not of themselves make up the matter of a great play. The whole question rests with the resurrected dead themselves. They form the collective hero of the drama. What do they do when they once more wander through a world that no longer needs nor wants them?

Only true poets can grasp the meaning of a hero, and Chlumberg definitely proves that he is not a poet. His dead merely wander back, discouraged and disheartened, to their graves. The ending which might have justified the play, and which certainly would have lent it some sweep and grandeur and immense poetic irony, is one that some one suggested to me, and which I pass on for what it is worth—namely, that the immortal dead should return to their graves in triumph, well quit of a world of shackles and tears and strife, and more than ready to let their poor battered bodies rest until a final resurrection at the death of the world itself. What more terrific comment could the mind of a poet devise than the glorious laughter of the dead at their knowledge of the release they have won from the valley of tears—a laughter mixed with compassion, and a pity as immense as eternity?

### *Wings Over Europe*

In spite of serious faults, "Wings Over Europe" is replete with two qualities that are seldom found together—abstract thought and exciting melodrama. Its failure—

which is a failure in clear thinking—is simply surcharged with prophecy. An outline of its substance is almost startlingly an outline of what inept world leadership may bring upon us.

The story is fanciful. Francis Lightfoot, a young scientific genius and a nephew of the Prime Minister, has discovered the secret of atomic energy. This knowledge has enabled him to construct a mechanism capable, let us say, of performing so minor a feat as changing wood into gold, or so major an operation as the shattering and disintegration of the entire world. The playwriting is so well handled that this astounding situation is made utterly believable. At least for the duration of the play, you remain convinced that Lightfoot has done the impossible, and that all that ensues from his discovery is logical, inevitable and terrifying. On no point does this play deserve higher praise than on its successful creation of this primary feeling of illusion.

What then happens is the world-old conflict between irresponsible genius and human inertia. The authors let it be known frankly that they are reviving the old Prometheus legend in modern form—the chaining of that creature, be he man or demigod, who dares to bring a greater knowledge of good and evil to mankind.

But the authors at no time really penetrate the essence of the problem. They establish an amazing half-premise, and middle term. And it is this, I believe, which is typical of so much in modern thought that passes for wisdom and insight. Lightfoot has some sort of vision of a new race of

god-men. But he gives no indication of how his discovery could be applied, of whether the control over matter should rest with governments, with a council of the whole world, or be handed over to all men as individuals. Apparently he starts with the idea that mankind has been dominated by fear of matter. His discovery makes man the master of matter. But where, then, does consciousness rest, or the will that is to control the new mastery? He not only gives no answer to this; he does not even raise the question, although it is instantly obvious and fundamental. Is there a spiritual essence distinct from matter but, up to now, operating through it and conditioned by it in its perceptions? Or is man himself merely matter, a victim of magnetic and other forces, and himself a part of them? The authors beg the question completely, and it is precisely because they do beg it that the play ends in dramatic disaster.

In other words, the authors have plunged headlong into what is actually the problem of the knowledge of good and evil—the paradox of forces, spiritual and material, which can be used for both creation and destruction. They try to settle this gigantic problem in the short spaces and narrow confines of a play, and to do so without ever deciding what it is that can exercise the newly discovered power.

This play is a splendid example of how modern thought checkmates itself by mistaking premises for conclusions, or, still more frequently, by forgetting to define a premise

at all, and so making a conclusion impossible. Such "thinkers" should have profound sympathy with the Mad Hatter—for there is surely no reason why the "very best butter" should not be the very best thing for a watch, unless you decide first that no kind of butter agrees with any kind of watch. A careful re-reading of *Alice in Wonderland* would have been a good advance discipline for the authors of "Wings Over Europe."

Is it too much to add, perhaps, (since the theatre is prophetic of realities) that a re-reading of Alice, both in Wonderland and through the Looking Glass, would be good advance discipline for the statesmen and politicians and financiers of a distracted world as well as for writers of the bitterer sorts of tragedy? How incomparably the Cheshire Cat embodies a world diplomacy that rests its case on facts that have long since disappeared—a diplomacy, for example, that telephones across oceans, but speaks as if distance were still a dividing fact. Or how exquisitely the tears of the walrus bespeak the self-love ending in self-pity of the race of men we are breeding under the reign of Narcissus! Nor are the financiers who sell credit but kick the creditors in a fury of "liquidity" so much more astute than the Queen of Hearts shouting "Off with his head!" Above all, why not a little saving nonsense? Both the real world and the play world are hungry for it. A tortoise dance, let us say, for the Ibsens—and possibly a caution, "You are old, father William!" to the sentimental Galsworthys. The poetic tragedies are divine come-

dies. The sordid tragedies—those which prophesy little courage left in the race—grow mostly from within cramped souls. A little laughter, gentlemen, and a good purge of wise nonsense!

## CHAPTER XII

### EUROPE'S LAUGHTER—SHARP OR FANCIFUL

THE laughter of Europe is not always happy. Frequently it is cynical—and that we can easily pass by, as cynics are short-sighted animals who can not possibly gather enduring perspectives. Sometimes it is merely sharp and a trifle bitter, as in most of Shaw's comedies. Occasionally it is not real laughter at all, but rather a fanciful smile charged with no little sympathy and kindness. Sir James Barrie has given us a wealth of this quiet fun. The truest laughter, because it is the most utterly human, has come to us from Spain in the genial good spirits and quiet wisdom of the Quintero brothers and of the Sierras. If I am apparently neglecting the boisterous farces of France, Austria and Hungary, and especially if I am heretical enough to forget Molnar, it is because he and the other jesters of the Continent have added little to the progress of the theatre. Their plays (with Molnar's "Liliom" and "The Glass Slipper" excepted, and these were far from comedies) are cast in one mould of cynical indifference.

#### *Concerning Bernard Shaw*

Shaw has at least been a crusader. His comedies are edged with damaging satire. He combines the wit of W. S.

Gilbert with the Puritan conscience of a revivalist, the sentimentality of a Victorian dowager, and the intellectual rebellion of an adolescent boy. All in all, it makes a highly fascinating if totally unworkable combination.

Shaw's greatest limitation, of course, not only as a playwright, but as an essayist and would-be philosopher as well, is his almost complete lack of a sense of universals. Only once, I believe, has he partly surrendered to the sweep of universal human problems, and that was in writing certain passages of "Saint Joan." At nearly all other times, his facile wit and slippery eloquence have vented themselves on things as immediate and particular and limited as a passing phase of the established Church of England, or a dying gasp of laissez-faire capitalism, or a spurt of feminism, or the fads of surgical specialists. The result is appallingly dull when matched against the succeeding fads and phases of even the next decade.

A very simple and obvious way of stating this case against Shaw is to say that most of his plays are "dated." But this expression is so much abused that it no longer completely fits the case. Critics are apt to say that a play is "dated" when all they really mean is that its construction and dialogue are old-fashioned—a criticism that holds equally true of "Hamlet" and "East Lynn" or of "Electra" and "The Great Divide." The real essence of a "dated" play is that its motivations ring true only in the period of its writing, and do not seem adequate to a later generation—much as a storm in yesterday's tea-pot seems ridiculous at today's cocktail shaking.



RACHEL CROTHERS

“. . . subtle propaganda mixed with capacious humor, considerable charity and much human warmth.”



A play that honestly concerns itself with universals never seems dated in the hands of good actors. The universals are the great common denominators of human feeling the world over—the basic aspects of the capital sins and the cardinal virtues, by whatever names they may be called. Jealousy is a universal, but woman suffrage is not. Betrayal of professional integrity is a universal, but a surgical fad of 1906 is not. Love and mating are universals, but the marriage laws of England under Victoria and Edward VII are not. One could expand indefinitely the list of human instincts and emotions, faults and achievements which are understood by and apply to the mass of mankind, whether black, white, yellow—or even Nordic! But if we took the subject matter and chief high dudgeon of nearly any Shaw play at random, we would find that so far from being a universal in essence, it would turn out to be something bounded by the current inhibitions of the British Isles and slightly less interesting historically than three-fourths of the day's *London Times*.

Of course, since he is obviously not a dullard, Shaw does prattle on about things which touch universals. "The Doctor's Dilemma" does touch on professional integrity, unavoidably. But the emphasis—the motive of the author's hot fury—is not so much the breach of integrity as a particular form of that breach prevalent at a particular moment of English history. If he were rewriting the play today, Shaw would probably turn his attentions from surgeons to gland specialists, or possibly to psychoanalysts.

In "Getting Married," for example, Shaw is only faintly interested in marriage, but is fumingly and fussily disturbed about the British divorce laws—a matter which even Judge Lindsay would not find very exciting.

This deep concern about ephemeral things characterizes the poorly balanced mind—the mind more alert to the abuse of a principle than to the need and permanence of the principle itself, the mind that is more apt to follow words than the meaning behind words, the mind that turns literal and cramped at the very instant it thinks it is discovering freedom. Minds of this type can hardly be creative or poetic. They are not even good reporting minds, since they do not see beneath words to facts. To them a man is much more what he says than what he does or than what he is in his heart, and therefore appears far more complex and often more absurd than he really is. The real and abiding humor of life, by which we see the simple child hiding beneath the most sophisticated man, utterly escapes the Shaws, who substitute a spurious humor based on the incongruity of mere words. This pseudo-humor leaves little space for charity and tenderness and tolerance.

"Arms and the Man" is probably Shaw in his best and truest comedy vein. For once he lets plot and situation and character lead him into outright laughter—and not too bitterly at the expense of others. In "Pygmalion," too, he is in fairly happy mood, somewhat abandoning himself to having a good time. Incidentally, the Theatre Guild,

which has become American producer-extraordinary to Shaw, has had its best time with these two plays.

In "Fanny's First Play," as in "Major Barbara," Shaw is so perpetually up to his favorite trick of setting up an imaginary dummy, only to knock him down with a feather, that I can never stir up much interest in either comedy. His "Androcles," however, is quite another matter. In this case, it is almost pathetic to see Shaw dissect himself in public. He is so unconscious of what he is doing, so certain that he is dissecting every one but himself, so merciless with his knife of wit because he does not see its double edge. And all the time he is telling you in unmistakable terms just why he has never been more than a clever man, and why the mantle of greatness has always eluded him.

His trouble is fear—a deep, tremulous fear of facing the truth and the strength of his own intuitive convictions and beliefs. You probably know a good many people like him. They toy with surface truths. But when it comes time to tell you what they really believe, they will throw you aside with a jest, afraid to let you see within them because they are afraid to look there themselves.

Hence you will find Shaw drawn irresistibly to the heroic—and promptly reducing heroism to its most ridiculous terms. You will find him fascinated by a pearl—and then telling you that a pearl is only the absurd defensive secretion of a slimy oyster. You will find him, in "Androcles," awed almost to reverence by the faith of the early Christian martyrs, and then reducing it to noth-

ing but an emotional hysteria expressed in half-a-dozen individual forms.

As it so happens that Shaw's religious instincts are his most highly developed ones, it follows as a matter of course that in "Androcles" he violates them with an almost ferocious intensity. Afraid or unwilling to ridicule Christianity, he ridicules Christians. He cannot avoid the subject. It has won a compelling mastery over him. But he can and does avoid facing the issue. And in exposing his own timorousness, he is dissecting himself far more cruelly than the Christian straw men he sets up and carves open on the stage.

### *Sir James Barrie*

It is rather a relief, in days when good humor is at a premium, to turn from the run of Shaw's plays to the genial and wise fancies of Sir James Barrie. Barrie, by the way, is a good example of one whose maturity sparkles quite naturally without the assistance of either purple ink or a written proclamation. Perhaps our sophisticates would not include the Barrie plays on an "adult" list. This is an interesting point but unimportant. The fact is, that Barrie has an overflowing charity of insight of the kind which only a genuine maturity can breed. You do not find much charity in slapstick, in Shavian satire, nor, for that matter, in the morbid variety of tragedy. The cruelty of the former and the moroseness of the latter are peculiarly the qualities of an undeveloped or unevenly developed mind. If you do not find much stark realism

in Barrie's plays, it is probably because Barrie knows that outward realities are transient and supremely unimportant. He is more concerned with the stuff visions are made of. It has a way of weaving an endless skein toward eternity.

Perhaps this is why so few actors succeed entirely in conveying the Barrie spirit. They must share largely in his own view, in his unconcern for the ephemeral and in his kindly earnestness about enduring things. This unconcern is the essence of his humor; this earnestness the strength of his charity. The two together make up his lasting charm.

It is a long time since we have had a revival of "The Little Minister" which really caught the Barrie mood. Ruth Chatterton's Lady Babbie, for example, was a trifle too self-conscious, and had a slightly forced and arched lightness. We have, in fact, only two or three actresses who, by very nature, can bring to Barrie the traditional Maude Adams touch of complete spontaneity. Sylvia Field might do it, though she has never tried, and the same is true of Claiborne Foster. Both have a touch of inner poetry generally obscured by the plays given them. But of Helen Hayes there is no doubt. She has acted in Barrie—and triumphed. I hope that some day she will do "The Little Minister," even though it could never surpass the magic of her performance in "What Every Woman Knows."

Once, perhaps, in many months, as the theatre runs today, one experiences the peculiar exaltation and self-

effacement which can come only in the presence of truly great acting. I had such an experience when Helen Hayes picked the character of Maggie Wylie from the surrounding fragility of "What Every Woman Knows" and made of her as sensitive, as noble and as enthralling a figure of comedy-drama as our stage has seen in many a long day. It was a moment in which you felt the re-creating of a great artist—simple, forthright, delicate, quaintly humorous and utterly untouched by mannerism or self-consciousness.

It was also a moment, however, in which you felt more than ever Barrie's utter dependence upon actors—upon actors, that is, who enter into and understand his own mood. This is his practical weakness and his artistic strength. Even his immortal "Peter Pan" is not exempt from this limitation. My first love of the theatre dates from two plays and two artists in those plays—one, Joseph Jefferson in "Rip Van Winkle" and the other, somewhat later, Maude Adams in her youthful radiance as "Peter Pan." For years after, I held the conviction that no one could again bring Peter to glamorous life. This conviction was only heightened by a Broadway revival attempted with a famous (and charming) musical comedy actress. The keenest surprise of my theatregoing life, then, came with the latest revival of Peter—by none other than Eva Le Gallienne in her Civic Repertory Theatre.

Of all the actresses on the stage today, Miss Le Gallienne is the last one I should have thought of to rival the memory of Maude Adams. Yet, in all sober truth, I must record

that the grave and often languid Eva Le Gallienne (she had not then shown her full powers in either "Camille" or "Romeo and Juliet") so caught the animated and sprite-like spirit of Peter that throughout an entire evening I did an incredible thing in never once drawing a mental comparison with Maude Adams. Miss Le Gallienne literally became Peter in her own right.

It happens that we are largely indebted to the group theatres for bringing to the American stage several of the most delightful and human European comedies of the last decade. "The Romantic Young Lady" by Sierra is one of them. It was produced by the Neighborhood Playhouse group (also responsible for Ansky's "The Dybbuk"). Two more are by the Quintero brothers. "The Lady from Alfaqueque" and "The Women Have Their Way" have been constantly on Miss Le Gallienne's repertory for several years. These latter plays are ideally suited to "little theatre" production and form an extremely valuable and delightful contribution to our treasury of rich comedy.

### *The Quintero Brothers*

"The Women Have Their Way" is really my favorite of these Spanish comedies although the love of native countryside in "The Lady from Alfaqueque" has an unrelenting charm. The Quintero brothers like Martinez Sierra have had the advantage of translation by Helen and Harley Granville-Barker. In view of the adaptability of their plays to amateur use, a few words about the Quinteros might be of interest. Serafin and Joaquin Quin-

tero have chosen as their special field the lazy, peaceful, sunny and comfortable section of Spain known as Andalusia. Here they have found many of the springs of universal life untouched by the complexities of industrialism or by the special problems which, from the very fact that we call them modern, must soon become dated and lifeless. In a typical Quintero play, you find yourself among people to whom the main preoccupations of life are love, jealousy, spite, gossip, good-natured interference in neighbors' affairs, poetry, song, marriage, birth, sickness, death or ripening and wise old age. They are not trying to live according to some brilliant philosopher's code of morals or conduct. The village priest is their companion and guide in most things. They remain reasonably close to the soil. Ownership of the land is a matter of course to them. The harvests, the seasons, the mosquitoes and flies are subjects of distinct and immediate concern. They know the acute pangs of homesickness when they leave their native village.

They are not, however, simple people. The mistake of so many writers in portraying village life is to assume that people are simple in simple surroundings and complex in complex surroundings. That is why so many village plays are little more than a parade of types, monotonous in their conformity to set ideas. Instead of recognizing, for example, that there is something of the gossip in every one, the authors pack all the essence of gossip into one person. Some one else typifies innocent young love, another rigid old age, another miserliness, another

villainy, and so forth. Each character might as well bear a label instead of a name, as in the morality plays. The Quinteros have avoided this tedious business by recognizing that each human being is, within himself, a miniature of the world of human beings, subject to all the temptations, and more or less alive to all the impulses, good and bad, which give life its adventurous goal.

The Quintero plays, unlike those of Barrie, are not dependent utterly upon perfection of acting and upon a certain intuitive quality of artistry. They are universal enough to find understanding anywhere. If Europe has given us less in modern lyric tragedy than we had a right to expect, and if our own tragic authors hold more promise for the immediate future, it is still true that we owe, to Spain, at least, a debt in mellow and joyous comedy which we shall be long in repaying.

## CHAPTER XIII

### STRONG CURRENTS AND STAGNANT WATERS

IN that fascinating zone between comedy and tragedy, the plays that have reached us from Europe have been predominantly strong and fresh. Only a few have given the feeling of spiritual stagnancy or of baffled will.

#### *Uncle Vanya*

One of the most enthralling plays our theatre has witnessed in recent years, for example, is Chekov's "Uncle Vanya." We owe Jed Harris the debt of a strangely quivering and richly modulated revival of this masterpiece. In fact the play, as our stage saw it, was almost entirely the work of its producer. For it is the kind of play that must be acted superlatively well before it glows with life—acted, that is, by a group of artists who are willing to subordinate every individual impulse to the unifying influence of a director's hand until, with his help, they have endowed it with the quality of a symphony. One false note, or one character too blatantly played, would break the spell in an instant, leaving the audience bored with the seemingly endless sorrows and frustrations of a group of unimportant people. The author, of course, has put all the potentials of a great play into his work, but it is the

kind of play one should either read, or see acted only with the highest perfection. It is this play as a living thing on the stage which Mr. Harris made his own, thus establishing himself as one of our few masters of stagecraft.

"Uncle Vanya" comes perhaps within the technical definition of comedy, but it is more a comedy of the soul, of trial, temptation and purgation, than of externals. It is a play in which fortitude carries the battle of the hour. Chekhov has taken, as usual, a group of people whose lives are strangely mixed up, and drawn simply and vividly the tangle of their emotions. It is a play which, due to the completeness and tender sympathy with which Chekhov delineates each character, centers around no one person. It is as if Chekhov had taken us under an invisible cloak to this strange meeting place of souls, and asked us simply to watch the irony and the pity and the bravery of lives that were not meant to work out their destiny in the here and now. The story comes through to us without bitterness and only with deep and vibrant compassion. It is a play of fundamentally strong characters, tried to their innermost depths, and found capable of whatever sacrifices are demanded of them. There are moments of faltering in the struggle, moments when one or another of these tortured souls is ready to give up, moments so human that only a great master could dare to breathe life into them without risk of desecration. But it is the recovery, the great upward sweep from just such moments which gives the play its universal sway and truth.

*A Month in the Country*

"Uncle Vanya" presents a vivid contrast to a similar group of people in Turgenev's first play to reach this country in English—"A Month in the Country," produced by the enterprising Theatre Guild. Both plays end in lonely country estates from which troubled beings have fled, but there is only defeat and retribution in the Turgenev play.

Turgenev belongs to that general period of Russian literature distinguished by Tolstoy, Gogol and Dostoievsky. He was born shortly after the close of the Napoleonic era and lived until 1883. He was one of the first to introduce into Russian playwriting the "natural" style later adopted, or carried on as a tradition, by Chekov and others. He is, in this sense, the originator of a school. In his general method of displaying character, he is not unlike the modern Spanish writers typified by the Quintero brothers. That is, he works along very simple lines, never forcing action, and permitting characters to display themselves through mental or emotional conflict with others rather than by the pulling of the dramatist's strings from without. He is, however, inclined to probe more deeply into the recesses of the mind than his Spanish counterparts of today. He takes rather more complex emotions for his theme, and without using any of the patented jargon of modern psychologists, anticipates frequently many of the problems to which they have given particular attention.

The substance of "A Month in the Country" is the manner in which the restless Natalia tries to keep the devotion of each of several men but succeeds only in losing all of them except her docile and patient husband. She is one of those types never quite ready to relinquish her hold upon any one, no matter what the cost in misery to the captive. As the play ends the house will soon be quite empty. Natalia has reaped the harvest of her egotism.

Turgenev attains great distinction in the handling of these characters, and through his masterly restraint. But the characters themselves are simply not of the "Uncle Vanya" mould.

*Right You Are if You Think You Are*

A closer European parallel to the Shavian, as distinct from the authentic Russian treatment of character is to be found in Pirandello. It would be quite fair, I think, to call him the Italian Shaw, above all in the sense that he uses plays to preach doctrines and ideas, and also because his ideas are not always as new as he thinks they are.

Perhaps the core of Pirandello teaching is contained in the prodigious title of a play which the Theatre Guild produced with relative success—"Right You Are if You Think You Are." From almost any view, this play violates all the canons of Broadway success. It speculates throughout three acts on the abstract nature of truth; it has virtually (or should we say virtuously?) no sex interest; one of its two principal characters is insane; it has the longest

known title, bar none; it has an "unhappy" ending. All of which probably accounts for its success. Such is the practical value of Broadway canons!

Undoubtedly Signor Pirandello, who likes to appear baffling, thinks he has demonstrated in this three-act "parable" the utter relativity of truth. One suspects that is why so modern-minded a group as the Theatre Guild took special delight in presenting it, for it is part of the mood of the day to flout all objective standards in the interests of private judgment. How comforting to convince yourself that what you want to believe is true, and then to act on the assurance that it is true because you think it is! Unfortunately (for the moderns) Pirandello has demonstrated only one thing—that he can write a highly diverting play. He leaves the matter of truth just where he found it, divided as it always has been, into one kind that is relative, because it depends on imperfect personal observation, and another kind that is quite absolute because it is objective. In brief, Pirandello is puzzling only to those who like to puzzle themselves by never defining words, or by using one word half a dozen times to mean half a dozen separate things. It is like using "bread" one minute to mean food in general, the next to mean a baker's loaf, a third time to mean hot-cross buns, and then concluding with the triumphant statement that there is no one who can possibly know just exactly what bread is after all. Here we have the essence of advanced modern thought!

But Europe can do much better in its honest drama

than Pirandello and Shaw, even without summoning the genius of dead Russians. There is, for example, that delicate and tender bit of Vildrac's, "Michel Auclair"—a play made to order for any little theatre group, and quite radiant with the stuff of fine lives.

*Michel Auclair*

Sidney Howard performed a happy service in translating, and the Provincetown group in producing this little masterpiece. Charles Vildrac is a poet of unusual perception, and Howard has kept all of the clear beauty of Vildrac's thought in a singularly graceful translation.

In "Michel Auclair" you find no glossing over of the suffering of life. There are moments in this little play to move stone—but with admiration instead of despair. It breathes the beauty, the courage, the strength and the crystal clarity of provincial France. It has something of the joy of sunlit vineyards and the sorrow of a sunset over a wide river. It has no great sweep of outward action. It has much of the simplicity of a folk song. Yet the action is there, deep in the souls of the characters, perpetual, striving action, so that even when you catch its simplest movements, you are fully aware of the struggle beneath, of the suffering and the unrequited longing and of the quiet strength that masters sorrow and makes its sublime.

It is more than a coincidence, I am sure, that this poet of provincial France should have so much in common with the Quintero brothers and with the Sierras. There is a community of simple directness between the quiet towns

of all Latin countries, something never captured in the great cities and cosmopolitan centers, a sort of racial atavism that gets at once to universals, that refuses to become complex and sophisticated. Where, but from this fresh and eager spirit, could a play like "Cradle Song" emerge?

### *Cradle Song*

Of course, there is a social as well as a theatrical significance to the astounding success achieved by Eva Le Gallienne's production of this fragile Spanish play by the two Sierras. It is no mere accident of faultless production that has made people swarm to "Cradle Song" at the same time that theatrical filth was reaching its lowest point in other parts of the city. It is, if you will, the great social law of contrast—the thing that brings forth saints in cycles of degeneracy, or that demands exaltation in order to save life itself from degradation.

"Cradle Song" is really a very profound study of the strongest human emotions, wrought with all the skill and tempered suspense of the most stirring drama. Only the story itself is simple; the theme is as varied as any a dramatist could choose. The story is this: a baby girl is left at the door of a convent of cloistered Dominican nuns, and, on the advice of the convent doctor, is adopted. In the second, and last act, this girl, now eighteen, is about to leave to be married to a young architect who is taking her to far-off America. The young man talks to the nuns through the grille; the girl makes her farewell and leaves.

And that is all! But beneath this lies the full and ageless power of maternal love, its dignity, its self-sacrifice, its quiet suffering—the everlasting tragedy and triumph of renunciation.

For each of these intensely individual nuns becomes in the finest spiritual sense a mother to the abandoned child. To one she is a bright song trilling in the convent garden; to another, a soul to be nourished before God; and to Sister Joanna of the Cross, who is still a novice the day the child is found, she becomes a child to be cherished, warmed, guarded, scolded, loved, even as this same Sister Joanna had had to care for her small brothers and sisters in the days before she entered the convent door. And in the strained moments of that last scene of parting, with the nuns trying to be cheerful in spite of their heartaches, a life story is revealed in the faces and in the least actions of each of them. Yes, it is a human, cheerful, strong story, shot through with pathos that never becomes sentimentality and with a love that knows how to say farewell bravely.

### *The Ivory Door*

As if "Cradle Song" were not enough to prove the public wiser than Broadway magnates who cater to them, we have also the historic success of A. A. Milne's "The Ivory Door," a play that is already finding its way into repertory wherever acting groups can be found. This play, first produced by Charles Hopkins (who is to Milne what the Theatre Guild is to Shaw), provides an evening of unencumbered delight.

Of course, if you refuse to believe that dragons ever squirmed about the earth, or that kings ever wore crowns, or that legends might be as powerful as truth, then your delight may be drenched in scepticism. In the sentiments expressed so engagingly by the little Prince Perivale in the prologue, you must be quite willing to pretend that truth is only make-believe, so that when your make-believe becomes too good to be true, you will know that it must be true! Not a frequent state of mind in this century, perhaps, but utterly satisfactory for children and for grown-ups wise enough to be as children.

It is quite impossible to convey the delightful irony with which this tale of omnipotent legend is told. Nor, without the illumination of gesture, and voice, can you gather its subjective implications. Probably there are thousands of us, clinging in fear to our cherished personal legends, who dare not pass the ivory door to the truth about ourselves. And if we do pass it, by chance or daring, we may not recognize nor welcome ourselves when we return. Thereafter we can only live at peace in the light of truth. The castle of our fancied kingship is too dark and narrow, clanking with the chains of ignorance—and if we are to be free, we must pass back again to the truth, which is the only bondage that yields freedom. You can take "The Ivory Door" a dozen ways—but none of them will be dull, unless, unhappily, you, too, have lost the key to that door and the garden beyond.

Two other plays, both of them romances, though in vastly different key, stand forth among the distinguished

foreign gifts to our stage. One is Monckton Hoffe's "Many Waters"; the other is Rudolph Besier's "The Barretts of Wimpole Street" whose theatrical life may well prove indefinite. There are many others, but these two are of a type so distinct and so important to the life of the theatre that they are far more than "just plays."

### *Many Waters*

There are moments, it is true, when the American presentation of "Many Waters" verged on that softer sentimentality which ultimately obscures deeper feelings. But to catch the least part of its deeper truths, one must take it in its heartrending entirety, and abandon one's self to an understanding of those unspoken things which batter and caress, shake the foundations of one's being and then softly mould the wreckage into what we lightly call character—and know inwardly to be the flame of spirit.

How else can one describe a play which takes two very ordinary lives and gives them that curious illumination which comes only from the most intimate picture of what they have passed through together?

Monckton Hoffe has his own way of opening up to you a charmed secret—the real truth about the lives of this apparently dull middle-aged couple. Scene by scene you are told of the passing magic—of their accidental meeting in the park during a thunder shower, of their swift and sudden love, of their mute and frightened marriage before a magistrate, with two scrub-women as wit-

nesses, of their rise to a moderate livelihood, of the daughter in their lives who has loved too soon and in a way forbidden, of her death in childbirth just as bankruptcy is facing her father, of the irony of his court trial when he is reprimanded for spending too much on the education of his daughter, now dead, of the slow and painful return to a modest income with a little house in the country.

Yes—an amazingly simple story, simply told, but with a fidelity to emotional values that almost sets you quivering, does, in fact, force you to a tension relieved only by the silent growth of an unquenchable flame. For in the trials, hopes and tragedies of this couple, you find one thing magnificently unshaken and rising always stronger—the mute understanding and love that unites them, unsung, almost unrealized, yet wholly worthy of a poet.

Plays such as this should go far to break the spell of brash hokum which has recently passed for authentic realism. There is, in the finest art, no line between romance and realism. They are one. The difficulty lies in showing why and how they are one, and that is why only great art can bring them to real fusion.

The true essence of romance is struggle and conquest. The trappings matter little. No ancient tale of knights in armor can win the glamor of romance unless it is keyed to struggle and conquest—for that is the story of life itself, a true and sometimes even desperate realism. If the obstacles are poverty, sickness, death, the struggle is all the greater because the obstacles are more inescapable and not of deliberate choice. The spirit in which the

battle is waged measures the degree of romance, not the ground on which it is fought nor the costumes worn nor the elegance and grace of the weapons used. It needs only the eye of the great artist, of the man who penetrates beneath detail to stark truth, to find struggle as the most obvious realism, the one thing never absent from life. To complete his romance from this raw stuff, he has to find the spirit of conquest in some human breast—no more and no less. It may be only the conquest of character, of soul, rising above the defeat of every material effort. But to fuse the realism of life with the romance of the spirit, there must be the faith that moves mountains—even if that faith should be found to lie only in the hearts of a humble English building contractor and his wife.

“Many Waters” breathes the spirit of an artist, and holds you inexorably with the romance that knows neither time nor place, circumstance nor limitation, seeking only human understanding.

### *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*

In the case of “The Barretts of Wimpole Street,” I am sure that Besier, the author, did not have to look far for his spirit of struggle and romance. He chose a far less difficult task than Hoffe, by the very fact of seeking to understand such radiant beings as Elizabeth and Robert Browning. It is, by the way, a pleasant augury for our theatre that Katharine Cornell signalized her entrance into the actor-manager arena by producing this play. It represented a pleasing and engaging contrast to many of

her previous vehicles—especially such meretricious pieces as "The Green Hat," "The Letter" and "Dishonored Lady."

"The Barretts" tells its romance without the least suggestion of mawkish sentimentality. It also achieves a distinct poetic and literary flavor without indulging in poetic prose. It has only one objectionable and quite unnecessary feature—namely, the characterization of Edward Barrett, the father. There is a broad and definite implication that, in addition to his domineering cruelty, he was afflicted with an abnormal psychological attachment for his oldest daughter. Throughout the play, Barrett violently opposes anything savoring of love affairs in the lives of his various daughters. As soon as he senses the real nature of Robert Browning's devotion to Elizabeth, he prepares to move his entire family, bag and baggage, into a remote part of the country. Faced by this possibility, Robert Browning insists that Elizabeth marry him at once so that she can get out of the atrocious atmosphere of the Wimpole Street house. Elizabeth asks for twenty-four hours in which to make her decision. She is then witness to a scene of unusual cruelty between her father and her youngest sister, Henrietta. It is this scene which determines her to marry Browning at once. It is not until her decision is wholly made and acted upon that she has the particular encounter with her father which reveals his curious psychological abnormality. The only effect of this discovery is to hasten her actual departure from the house by about half an hour. It has nothing whatever to do with her major

decision to marry Robert Browning. As a matter of fact, when the above scene occurs, she has already been secretly married to Browning for several days and is merely waiting for the best moment to make her escape from the Wimpole Street house. The injection of this particular note, therefore, is quite gratuitous in the sense that it does not supply a direct motive for any major action of the play. It is possible, of course, that the author felt that only such a revelation of Barrett's underlying character could serve adequately to explain his actions throughout the play. The whole scene in question is handled with restraint, but is a discordant note in what is otherwise one of the most beguiling stage romances of recent years.

It is in plays such as "The Barretts" and "Many Waters," and not forgetting the fragile beauty of the Vildrac, Milne, Sierra and Quintero plays, that Europe still commands a slight preëminence over the work of American authors. The native American genius, in the first stages of our new creative period, is expressing itself best in the raw surge of lyric tragedy and in the sheer vitality and exuberance of the Street Scenes, and the Green Pastures. The quiet maturity of the European artists and their mastery of simple elements will come to American authors, I believe, only with certain profound changes in our national life. Rumors of those changes are already in the wind—the slow discipline of adversity after fifteen years of war fever and its prosperous aftermath, the subsidence of that wild laughter which once greeted every caution, the hunger for deeper certainties in a world of

toppling institutions, the search for tranquillity in a moral and spiritual storm. Our poets may soon catch these rumors and give them substance—even if that substance appears to be only the illusion of the astonishing theatre.

## CHAPTER XIV

### CAN ACTORS BE ARTISTS?

SOMETIMES it appears that the actor lives in an unfriendly world—not, of course, in the sense of having no friends, no admirers, no willing press agents and no applause, but surely in the sense of having his most secret instinct attacked as spurious. What I mean is that acting as a fine art either is looked down upon by nine out of ten “creative” artists, or else the very possibility of its existence is denied. The actor, so they say, is not truly a creative artist at all. He is merely a mimic, pretending to be a personality he is not, uttering lines put into his mouth by some one else and simulating emotions he does not feel. Ask the really fine actor what he thinks of this view of his work, and you will rapidly find why he thinks he lives in an unfriendly world.

The trouble lies, I believe, in our popular misuse of the phrase “creative art.” We use it ordinarily to describe the process of bringing something out of what is apparently nothing. We speak of the novelist as “creating” certain characters, of the painter as “creating” certain moods or impressions, and we say in each case that it is done out of something so intangible as his imagination. The truth is that this process which we admire so extravagantly is

one of reproduction rather than creation. Just because it goes on inside the brain of the artist is no reason for assuming that it uses no objective materials. The sunset stirs a mood of melancholy in the painter. Months later, perhaps, a chance happening recalls the mood. He does not remember the particular details of the scene, but he finds some other symbol to express the mood, perhaps death, and gives it form on his canvas. He is reproducing in objective form a mood stimulated by an objective happening. The novelist has his resentment awakened by a character or group of characters. The resentment lives until, some day, he gives it objective expression in a group of characters he holds up to scorn—not portraits of the identical characters he has known, but true symbols of those characters. He, too, is reproducing. We call it "creating" simply because we have not been able to watch the long processes which have been at work within his mind.

Now let us glance for a moment at the actor. He is given objective materials—a situation, words, the suggestions of emotion. He is asked to bring them to life from the dead pages of a manuscript. What must he do? First, try to find that depth in his own nature which responds to and understands the character he is asked to portray. He may never have robbed a bank to keep his daughter in fine feathers. But if he is an artist—that is, a man of many potentialities—there is undoubtedly a side of his character which could rob a bank under similar circumstances, and has never done so simply because, as a person, he has brought that impulse under the control of

reason and will. To portray the bank robber successfully on the stage (and that means to carry across to an audience a genuine illusion) he must bring to life, as one might rub a frozen hand, that possible self which understands how a man might rob a bank. If he is merely an actor (as painters may be merely draughtsmen and novelists merely reporters) he will succeed only in giving the outer aspects of the character and fail to carry conviction. But if he is a true artist, he will reproduce from within himself the character stimulated by the objective materials of the play. At least once during rehearsals, he will have felt the thief within him as surely as the artist felt death when he looked upon the sunset or as the novelist felt resentment when he moved among a certain group of people. And during that moment of rehearsal the artist-actor will establish the pattern of his part. He may not go through the same emotions at every performance—just as the novelist may not feel his resentment perpetually during the months it takes to complete a book. But in the setting of the original pattern, the actor has reproduced (or “created,” if that word must be used) a work of art as truly as any other man who claims the title of creative artist.

The soul of the artist, which possesses a great many selves, and in this sense is not unlike the soul of a saint or a sinner, can express itself in myriad forms—and one of them, I maintain stoutly, is when bedecked in grease-paint and costume before blinding footlights. The more he is the true artist, the more the actor is being one pos-

sible part of himself, and not, as his rival artists would pretend, a paltry mimic.

If you consider the further facts that the actor must bring his "creation" to life over and over again, and that every small detail of his technique in doing so is subject to full public scrutiny, you will agree, perhaps, that he is not only a creative artist (when he is an artist at all) but one who evokes his art under the most trying and exacting circumstances. The public does not see the novelist at work (except through the eyes of a publisher's publicity department), nor is it present at his moments of utter futility. He may have smashed a dozen pencils, or thrown a typewriter into the kitchen tub when "creative" processes became blocked—but none of that appears on the orderly printed page. Imagine the sensation if a well known actor, suffering from a recalcitrant salad, suddenly rushed off the stage shouting "This audience is impossible! I can't stand the sight of those rows of gaping morons another instant! Take me to a Turkish bath before I collapse!" This small scene is unthinkable—but for the sole reason that it never happens. Only the astounding morale of actors as a group prevents its happening a dozen times a season—their morale, that is, and one other thing intimately bound to morale, namely, technique.

The technique of the actor-artist is the guardian of his artist's soul. It comes to his support not once but a thousand times a season. It is the form he has given, once and for all, to that "pattern" he established during the creative moments of rehearsal. It is the physical and spiritual

negative from which he can reproduce a positive print at will. If this negative—or matrix, if you prefer—is defective, if it does not give the outlines of the character as the artist has felt it, then all the creative impulse will have been wasted. It is profoundly true, then, that the actor is not fully an artist until he can do two things, first create his emotional pattern, and then establish the objective form of that pattern so that he can reproduce it indefinitely and without reference to his momentary mood. It is the obviousness of this technique which clouds the deeper vision of the actor's creative artistry.

Possibly the most unfortunate thing that has happened to many of our younger actors and actresses today is the relative contempt they have acquired for this saving and imperative technique. For one thing, they are rebellious and individual enough to believe that they can depend entirely on their "creative" impulse, that a mood once captured can be trotted forth at will like a pet poodle. They are so concerned with this whole matter of being creative that they prefer to generate every night from within the forces necessary to carry the part across to the audience. I am afraid it is also true, however, that many of our young bloods have acquired an unhappy, rigid mental picture of the older school of actors. It is quite true that many who have come to be known as "old-timers" are inclined to indulge too often in obvious theatricalisms, in exaggerations of gesture and mood which do not fit the current demand for naturalism. But to let the picture of their faults obscure the basic principles under-

lying their work is to throw away carelessly generations of accumulated experience and knowledge of what creates successful illusion for an audience.

The whole point is that the theatre is highly artificial, even when it gives the effect of being most natural. Not a good line of dialogue is written, not a scene is painted, not a gesture is made that would stand the test of literal and close comparison with real life. The mere physical element of distance between actor and audience necessitates this difference, particularly as the sum-total effect of a play must be felt as clearly in the last row of the gallery as in the front row of the orchestra. The theatre is just one huge mass of conventions, tested for hundreds of years back as to their importance in producing, not reality, but the appearance of reality. The actor or actress must, to be good, strike the median point of all these conventions, something which will not overpower the front rows, nor be too feeble to reach the back rows. The phrase "playing to the gallery" means more than truckling to mob emotions. It also means that the actor is passing beyond the point of median expression and forgetting the front rows entirely. What the younger generation of actors sees in the "old school" is the occasional play to the gallery. What it fails to see is the careful study and practice of that happy medium of exaggeration, without which half the illusion of the theatre is lost.

Acting conventions (or technique) include, of course, the right placing of the voice (far above real conversational pitch), the enlargement of gesture or facial expres-

sion to the point where it can be seen and understood, even if it is no more than a movement of the fingers or a turn of the head or a contraction of the eyelids, and, above all, a rhythmic sense of the timing of words and the gestures that go with them. The right timing of a speech or single line is as important to the action of a play as the timing of a throw in baseball. If a short-stop's throw is delayed too long, the final hurried snap of the ball is apt to result in disaster. Bad timing does the same thing to the illusion of a play. An actor waits an instant too long to pick up his cue, then rushes his speech to make up for the delay, and without the audience knowing quite why, the particular scene falls flat or loses all the significance the playwright had intended to give it. The modern effort at "naturalism" has meant little more, in many cases, than gross neglect of the most elementary rules of timing, on the mistaken theory, perhaps, that people in "real life" are never "playing up to" an audience and never do think about timing their words and their gestures. The danger is not so much that timing and other conventions will lose their value (they will reassert their own importance soon enough), but that things which an older generation might pass on as a living tradition will have to be learned again. The artificiality of the theatre is its greatest claim to realism.

It is tempting always, to write of individual actors and actresses, to try to reflect, however faintly, the glamor they radiate, to trace in a hundred details of voice, face, figure, gesture and speech the secret of their art. But

sooner or later this delightful occupation leads to comparisons, to a miserable grading of talents that should stand unfettered and unmarked. It also leads, in a day when the stage is abounding in talent and more than talent, to a sort of Homeric catalogue of the ships. For present purposes, then, I hope I shall be pardoned for mentioning only a few actors and actresses by name, and then only because each one helps, as a luminous example, to illustrate some phase or facet of artistry and technique.

*Mrs. Fiske*

For years, Mrs. Fiske has been a brilliant object-lesson in the perfect timing of speeches. This essential bit of technique—and the most neglected in the younger group—is a matter of instinct, in part, like good phrasing in music, but also something which may be acquired by painstaking practice. To sit through a performance by Mrs. Fiske and to note the subtle hesitations, the quick crescendos, the sharp accents on pungent syllables and the sustaining of a perfect flow of rhythm at the same time—well, it is quite as fascinating as the best moments of the play itself, or as the work of a superb orchestral director compared to a routine band-master.

*Margaret Anglin*

Margaret Anglin is another artist of an established school who knows timing. But her essential artistry has

a different quality—something I have tried to describe in speaking of her production of "Electra." Miss Anglin, whether in tragedy or comedy—and provided the part gives her the initial impulse—seems to create entirely from within, and with an almost daemonic force. Her body and her voice (which some one likened to the sound of the Irish sea) are merely instruments. You can sense, as something almost distinct from them, the spiritual and emotional pattern surging beneath and through them.

Among the younger actresses, I am inclined to select seven, not as the greatest artists—what a hideous comparison that would involve!—but as important artists of such individual quality that each presents some glowing beauty of the actor's inclusive art. The seven (and how painfully arbitrary that number sounds!) are Lynn Fontanne, Helen Hayes, Eva Le Gallienne, Blanche Yurka, Katharine Cornell, Jane Cowl and Mary Ellis. If you stop to think that this list neglects the adept and delightful Ruth Gordon, the sensitively eager Claiborne Foster, the wistful Sylvia Field, the outrushing June Walker, the radiant Helen Gahagan, the ingratiating Eugénie Leontovitch and a dozen others of thoroughgoing artistry—as distinct from mere talent—you will see why any list whatever is an outrage and a piece of inherent injustice. But in the distinct and varied work of the seven, you will find the essence of those qualities in which the others share. Artists of the screen, having mastered a totally different technique, must be considered quite apart.

*Lynn Fontanne*

Lynn Fontanne is a past-mistress of two techniques, comedy and tragedy. Her Theatre Guild association has given her an extraordinary opportunity to play an amazing variety of rôles. But there is more to her achievement than the offspring of opportunity. You will notice in her playing, first of all, a superb authority and a fine sense of proportion and restraint. She is never guilty of over-acting even the most tempting part. Nine times out of ten she will use understatement to establish her point, reserving for one moment only of the play a magnificent intensity. Her sense of humor—especially of the ridiculous—lends delightful abandon to her comedy. But when she plays tragedy, she can blaze with transforming fires, all the more terrible because they can be seen smouldering long before they leap forth.

*Helen Hayes*

With Helen Hayes, on the other hand, you are far less conscious of authority than of a sense of utter abandon to the feeling of the character. Miss Hayes has the particular artistry of self-lessness, a sort of quivering beauty which takes its action from forces working through her. She is quite capable of climactic strength, and the mere fact that you are unconscious of her authority does not mean that she lacks it in the least. But she does, in effect, let the part absorb her rather than attempt to dominate the part.

*Eva Le Gallienne*

Eva Le Gallienne has probably developed and expanded more in her art in recent years than any other one actress. A few years ago, it might have been said, in all fairness, that she was inclined to be cold, reserved, saving of her emotional energies, and to be too completely dominated by an intellectual conception of her parts. Perhaps the gigantic task of organizing and directing her Civic Repertory group had something to do with this, but I imagine that the fault lay deeper, in a sort of emotional knotting which made her unwilling or unable to give her feelings free rein. Certainly when she acted in "Liliom," (before her new venture) she attained real tragic power—only to lose it in the following years. But something shattered this barrier shortly before she began her revival of "Romeo and Juliet." It disappeared utterly by the time she revived "Camille"—with the astonishing results I have tried to describe in earlier pages. Miss Le Gallienne's art is still primarily intellectual. That is, you feel that the pattern of the part has been thought out before it has been felt. A few years ago, it seldom passed beyond the thoughtful stage. Now, however, it is finely and sensitively completed by a storm of feeling, always under just enough control. Where an actress of Miss Anglin's type seems to create a part by intuition and feeling first, with the later discipline of analysis and thought, Miss Le Gallienne seems to reverse this process. In the end, the result in both

cases is complete roundness and beauty. Only the initial impulse is different.

*Blanche Yurka.*

Blanche Yurka, whose Gina in Isben's "Wild Duck" has rightly become one of the classic characters of the American stage, apparently achieves a rather exceptional balance between thought and feeling in the early creation of her rôles. If I may hazard making a distinction, I should say that Miss Yurka's first impulse springs from the idea of the part—from what the part implies in spiritual, moral or mystical significance. This is something quite different from a mere intuitive feeling of the character; it is also different from an intellectual appraisal. It strikes directly at the theme, at the question the character must face and answer. It is said that Miss Yurka once suggested to a playwright that there were three possible plays centering around a woman—the woman and a man, the woman and her child, and the woman and her God. This sharp feeling for theme—as against plot and personality—is, I feel, quite characteristic of Miss Yurka's entire approach to the theatre. The part slowly becomes individualized in her mind, through both feeling and analysis. But first of all comes the idea—which must later realize itself in action.

*Katharine Cornell*

Of Katharine Cornell, it has been said to distraction that she is glamorous, that her own personality dominates

every rôle to the complete absorption of the character. But this is true only in the most superficial sense. Miss Cornell can act, and has acted, quite disagreeable parts, others as brittle as the determined and outrageous heroine of "Dishonored Lady," many others as mellow and maternal as *Candida*, as fragile as Elizabeth Barrett or as utterly mysterious and captivating as one of *Cazanova's* many flames. She is never the same in any two parts except in this, that any character she creates does have a distinct personal aura. But the aura belongs rightfully to the character as Miss Cornell understands her. This is the artist's supreme contribution.

At this point, however, we sense the distinguishing quality of Miss Cornell's art—something which I believe the psychologists call "rationalization," by which she often reads into a character more than the author has placed there. One can almost feel her weaving into a character certain emotions and ideals and motives for action which may be far nobler and finer than the author intended. It is as if she were saying, "I don't really like this woman as she appears in the script—but I am sure that if I were in her place, and did the same things, it would be because of this or that hidden motive." Whereupon Miss Cornell proceeds to write a play within a play, contributing by voice or gesture what the author has omitted. This whole process is probably quite sub-conscious—but its result, often misleading as to the real value of a play, is the incomparable Cornell glamor. When put to the service of worth-while plays—such as "*Candida*" or "*The Bar-*

retts"—it is simply enthralling. It is creative artistry chiefly in the sense that it is playwriting without words.

*Jane Cowl*

In the undoubted art of Jane Cowl, we have still another variant of creative gift. I imagine that Miss Cowl, like Miss Yurka, has a deep interest in theme, in what the woman she is acting is and does—and why. But with this comes a deep concern for the beauty and perfection with which the character can be conveyed—that is, for beauty of form and clarity of meaning. In "Twelfth Night," for example, she manages to keep all the poetic music of Shakespeare's lines without for an instant sacrificing their meaning. She makes very little attempt at characterization—in the objective sense. On the other hand, the essence of the character flows through her with an apparent ease and simplicity that quite belie the care and intelligence used in establishing this free channel. What she does is to create the perfect and unobtrusive medium for the author's intentions—a passive art, if you will, but only in the possible sense that the irrigation of a desert is passive, because it permits the clear waters from the mountains to flow into the earth.

*Mary Ellis*

Mary Ellis might never have come into her own as an artist of the first calibre if it had not chanced that her first important rôle after leaving the musical stage was

that of Leah, in Ansky's "The Dybbuk." In this part, of a young girl possessed by a departed male spirit, in which the spirit itself often speaks through her mouth, Miss Ellis accomplished the transitions of dual personality and dual voice—one feminine, the other masculine—with true mystical quality. She did even more by her perfect pantomime than by her words. Later, in Dostoievsky's "Crime and Punishment"—re-christened "The Humble"—she went to the heart of another mystical character, a girl who lives by ardent but quite inarticulate faith. From that to a modern version of "The Taming of the Shrew" proved an easy though abrupt transition. In her range, and in her mastery of both comedy and tragedy, Miss Ellis has more in common with Lynn Fontanne than with any of the other actresses I have mentioned. But she also has this distinctive quality, that her creative effort seems to rush simultaneously and equally from a mental and from an intuitive impulse. Neither seems to predominate. One feels a singularly quick and flashing co-ordination between the two impulses—so often opposed to each other in the make-up of true artists—as if the final result were less a matter of resolving a conflict than of a spontaneous union. Perhaps, after all, that is the full meaning of what we loosely call intuition, but if so, it is the kind of intuition that is not baffled at being asked to explain itself in words, nor checkmated by the need of carrying thoughts into swift and harmonious action. This does not imply that Miss Ellis is a greater artist than those

who have to labor to bring about an adjustment of impulses. But it does imply a rare gift—which Miss Ellis knows how to use to the hilt.

These variations in the quality and methods of artistry among actresses carry through with equal force to men—although there are, to all appearances, fewer actors who rank as creative artists than actresses. For one thing, modern playwrights make fewer demands upon men than women. It is not often that the theme of a great modern play centers about the struggle of a man. We have few modern Hamlets or Macbeths. However, it is not difficult to pick at random certain actors who, when given the opportunity, have shown highly individual qualities as creative artists. Edward G. Robinson—who has not entirely deserted the stage for the screen—is one of them. Alfred Lunt is certainly another—and if we wish to make the number once more an arbitrary choice, and as illustrative examples only, we have Leslie Howard, Paul Muni, Tom Powers, and Henry Hull, not to mention, among the older school, Otis Skinner and, with reservations, George Arliss. John Barrymore's absorption by the screen is too complete to permit more than the haunting memory of his "Hamlet."

### *Alfred Lunt*

Alfred Lunt, who has the artistic good fortune to be the husband of Lynn Fontanne, is still more fortunate in being an artist of equal calibre and achievement. In spite of a clouded diction which he has never been able to sur-

mount, Mr. Lunt easily stands in the first rank of American and European artists. His approach to a part is, one gathers, entirely a matter of feeling. He gives the impression of being an actor who must sink very deeply into the emotional side of the character he is playing before the pattern of the part begins to take form. As a result, he transforms every fibre of his body. Those who saw him as the gangster brother in Sidney Howard's "Ned McCobb's Daughter" could not possibly imagine him in "Outward Bound," nor as the Emperor Maximilian, nor as Lord Essex, nor, above all, as the fanatic revolutionist with a touch of diabolism in Franz Werfel's "Goat Song." The number of his rôles is legion—but in each of them he literally becomes the character, in carriage of his body, in manner and gesture and in smallness or greatness of spirit.

*Edward G. Robinson*

Edward G. Robinson—whom Hollywood has cast as the screen's chief gangster—is another who completely submerges himself in the physical as well as the mental aspects of his characters. His particular creative gift, however, lies in his elaborate study and use of detail to fill out and expand character and to make every slightest emotion clearly visible to the audience. In other words, he is a master technician who uses his technique strictly as a means to an end. The technical side of his art never degenerates into mere artifice. To see him in three such rôles as the epileptic in "The Brothers Karamazov," as the

lecherous and degenerate emperor in "Androcles" and as the incisive and determined General Diaz in "Juarez and Maximilian" is to understand what the full and intelligent union of feeling and technique can bring to the art of illusion. In "Kibitzer," which Mr. Robinson helped to write, he created a rôle as important in its way as any of the famous satirical portraits of Molière.

### *Leslie Howard*

Leslie Howard is an actor who gracefully accepts certain limitations as to rôles he can play, and then devotes a highly sensitive intelligence to giving those parts rare perfection. He is like a pianist who knows that he can not attain to the full majesty of Beethoven, but sets to work to render Chopin and Mozart incomparably. "Berkeley Square" could hardly have seemed a play of importance if Howard had not been there to utter those last infinitely tender and wistful lines. His comedy sense is also sure and suave. But above all he is the artist of refinement and grace in terms that never lack masculine directness and clarity.

### *Tom Powers*

Tom Powers—never to be forgotten for his "Charlie" in "Strange Interlude" and for his Gregers Werle in "The Wild Duck"—is also an artist of limited range, but one who captures first of all the idea behind a difficult part. His playing seems to center around that idea and to live by it with ferocious intensity. At such times he is almost

idea incarnate. This particular kind of artistry is far too rare in days when emotion seems to count for everything and ideas are orphaned.

*Paul Muni*

Paul Muni—whom the stage first recognized as Muni Weisenfreund—is frankly an emotionalist. There is something of the majesty, and also of the frenzy of a dance in his best performances. He draws upon both body and voice, using both as instruments to be played upon, rather than as instruments through which the part itself flows. He is the antithesis of the over-calm modern English school of acting, having far more in common with the highly strung German actors of the type of Moissi. He uses artificiality and exaggeration with deliberate intent to heighten illusion. His work is always intensely interesting, especially as representing a modern version of the art that must have been Irving's and Salvini's, and that was certainly Mansfield's. He would make an astounding Othello.

*Henry Hull*

Henry Hull has moments of greatness. The streak of vagabond poetry that runs through his family would almost assure that. He might be at his best as François Villon—although he can be utterly engaging as King Perivale in "The Ivory Door" and was certainly daemonic force unchained as the negro lover in "Lulu Belle." Given a part without poetry, Henry Hull is polite, re-

served and not very exciting. But with the stimulus of a poetic idea—as distinct from a merely dramatic or character idea—he rises on it in a broad sweeping crescendo, whether of fancy, fury or the madness of a Gypsy April.

### *Otis Skinner*

In the older school, there is also something of the vagabond in Otis Skinner. The stage may seldom see again a portrait as superbly balanced as his Falstaff in “Henry IV,” or even in the “Merry Wives of Windsor.” In the latter play, I saw Sir Henry Beerbohn Tree take the part, playing opposite Ellen Terry, some twenty years ago. I do not recall, however, in Tree’s conception of the outrageous old knight anything that evoked knighthood. Otis Skinner made one feel, somehow, that Falstaff had once done something to gain his spurs—that he might be preposterous and lecherous now, in the fatty degeneration of age, but that there was still a spark in him of valor. Thus Otis Skinner gave us a Falstaff in three dimensions, with comedy none the less pointed for a touch of pathetic gallantry. True vagabond artists are as rare on the stage today as poets on a bank directorate. The “polite” tradition has carried us almost too far. Otis Skinner manages to be both polite and a true vagabond—by which token I hold him as one of the most distinguished artists our stage has reared. Above all, his distinction is matched by a capacious sense of fun and a sharp wit.

*George Arliss*

George Arliss, on the other hand, is all politeness. The reservation I mentioned as to his artistry comes from a feeling that there is far too much cold-blooded calculation in all that he does—in his make-up, in his timing and in his gestures. His is a surface art of distinct perfection, graced by fine irony. But you do not feel beneath it that ecstasy or abandon which sets the creative artist apart from the rest of mankind. One can act artistically without displaying the real surge of artistry. One can, in short, use artifice to counterfeit art. Arliss is one of the best artificers of the old school. I am not at all sure that he is one of the best artists.

In this obviously unfair selection of a few individuals to illustrate what the art of the actor can be, and how richly varied according to approach and dominating quality, a hundred faces have flashed across my eyes for every one person mentioned. A whole performance, or perhaps a single unforgettable gesture or speech, rises up to protest at not being recorded in words. But, as in the matter of plays, one can not be inclusive without being interminable. Actors compel my deepest admiration and affection. Their work never ends. They are the only living things in the theatre, yet their life is singularly not their own. Perhaps they are all vagabonds, even though so few can act the vagabond, but if so, they live up to their name in helping to break the bonds of the world—for others! There is something of the artist in every last

one of them. A few are consummate artists. For all that they wear the masks of make-up and character, their masks are less rigid than those most of us wear. No part of them can ever become frozen, for some day it may be needed to give life to words. By being masters of illusion, they also manage to become masters of revealing truth.

## CHAPTER XV

### NEW EXPRESSIONS FOR OLD

THIS book has centered chiefly around plays and players—which is quite as the inner nature of the theatre would have it. A play is the soul and the actors are the substance of the theatre. But we live in an age of embellishments, and year by year the mechanics and the business of play producing have made increasing room for all tributary arts.

If you want to know what all the talk about “new art” in the modern theatre means, do not, by any means, drop in casually at any of the theatrical expositions held from time to time in our large cities. A casual glance will merely increase the mystery surrounding so much of the work which the younger theatre enthusiasts in all countries are doing. But if you have the time and the urge to make a real study of such exhibits, then the chances are that you will come away with a much clearer insight into a form of madness which every now and then attains the height of genius.

I have always found it interesting to approach the work of the scenic artists of the modern theatre with the feeling that they are trying, through the use of color and design, to convey to an audience emotions which words

alone, and the work of actors, can not fully express. The point is that there are mysteries in life which can never be wholly expressed in words, for the simple reason that words are always finite and mysteries approach the infinite. Just as there is a language of music before which bare words must wither, so there is a language of emotion or feeling too great for verbal utterance. The genius of a truly great artist—a Duse, for example—can often convey far more by a look or gesture than by any of the spoken lines of a play. The great object of those who have departed from photographically realistic stage setting is to create a similar language of feeling through the use of color, design, movement and light.

You can divide the work at most expositions roughly into three sections. You will find stage settings that are merely a simplification of the old realism, often accompanied by the greatly enhanced beauty which simplicity lends. In a second section, you will find settings which have no apparent relation to realism, but which have an unmistakable inner form and harmony, so that in a rather mysterious way they convey the true feeling of a scene or situation without pinning that scene down to the particular details of any one time or place. The summit of achievement in one such group I studied was the model for the magnificent Dante project by Norman Bel Geddes. In the third group you will find the same complete departure from realism without any evidence of inner harmony or design. The bizarre is deified for its own sake. Chaos is magnified. You find here a complete

negation of inner or mystical form. This means the rumor of evil in art.

On the whole, the destructive forces are far less apparent in the American section of the average exhibit than in the European. You are apt to find yourself returning to the American room at frequent intervals for a breath of fresh air. Even where the work of the Americans shows complete abandonment of realism in favor of designs that merely suggest mood or fantasy, you will feel and can usually, after a little study, trace out the form and coherence which give the work beauty and an authentic quality. From the semi-realistic work of Claude Bragdon and Lee Simonson, for example, through the imaginative flights of Robert Edmond Jones to the purely delightful fantasies of Donald Oenslager, there will be a definite transition of mood, a forceful authority, and a clear indication of a governing design in the artist's mind.

In Geddes' Dante project (which must certainly continue to be part of any exhibit worthy of the name) you will find something conceived on a scale commensurate with the sublime power of Dante's own work. Of course you can gather very little from the model itself of the movement, the color, the sound, and the mystery for which Mr. Geddes has planned in the finished production. When this drama of immensity is finally set before us, we shall see an achievement which will bear the same relation to other dramatic works of today that Dante's own poem bears to the dwarfed efforts of those

who came before him, and of most of those who came after him. In this project, Mr. Geddes has found a theme so much greater than himself that it summons the utmost striving of his art. He has caught to an amazing measure the mystery of the summit of the thirteenth century.

Of course the misleading feature of all expositions of this sort is the absense of movement in light, color, and sound which gives the theatre its real magic. It is quite possible that in many of the sets in the European section, the apparent lack of design and form might be compensated in the plan of the artist by the groupings of actors and the careful use of lighting effects. For example, I recall seeing one stage set in which the prevailing impression was brilliant red on one side and deep black on the other. Naturally, this strikes one as entirely out of balance. But you can imagine that in the course of the production of the play, warm lights such as red and yellow could be made to play upon the dark side of the stage, and colder lightings upon the red side with a harmonizing result. Or it might be that the chief groupings of actors in brilliantly colored costumes would always be arranged on the black side of the stage.

It is almost as unsatisfactory without the presence of actors and lighting to appraise work of this sort as it is to come into a cold and unlighted theatre between performances. You see certain properties and scenery on the stage, but they are as literally dead in their feeling as the body without a soul. The essence of the theatre is continuous motion. To this extent, then, it is only fair to

reserve judgment on the more promising part of the run of foreign exhibits. But there are other cases in which I am sure that even the most carefully worked out schemes of lighting and group movement would never bring that sense of inner design animating every project which a man like Mr. Geddes touches.

The essential of good scenic design, it seems to me, should be its complete subordination to the playing of the actors. It has the same relation to these living parts of the theatre that a costume has to the individual. The more beautiful a woman, the simpler her costume must be if it is to reveal and not conceal her beauty. When the settings of a play are too elaborate or distracting, one suspects either that the play itself is weak, or that the producer has lost all sense of proportion. Norman Geddes once provided a mountainous and beautiful setting for a mole-hill of a play called "Arabesque." Pictorially the effect was superb; dramatically it was absurd. On the other hand, if a play has majesty, the settings must have the same quality. That is only keeping a true proportion. Above all, however, the setting must be something in which the actors can live and move. It must have nothing to interrupt the rhythm of their work, nothing that will throw them into obscurity at the very instant they need revealing light. The trouble with most of the mechanistic and futuristic and architectural experiments I have seen has sprung from precisely this forgetfulness of the actor. Geddes knows how to make every line of an architectural setting lead toward the actor, but many of his Euro-

pean and a few of his American contemporaries do not know this secret. Or, if they do, they yield too often to the temptation of obtruding their architecture at any cost—art for art's sake, but not for the sake of the play and its players.

Little theatre groups, especially, are apt to spend unconscionable effort in novelty of design and production when extreme and even austere simplicity would do far better service. There is a rich burden of work waiting for little theatre groups willing to undertake what the commercial theatres must leave alone. Let me recall, for example, an occasion in the quiet of Manhattanville College grounds in New York, when a limited audience had the chance to hear and witness something extraordinary—the performance by a group of parish school children of a Nativity play for which the words and music were written by the children themselves. These were the children so carefully trained under the auspices of the Pius X School of Liturgical Music, and the tenderly simple words of the Bethlehem story were sung in the intervals and tonalities of Gregorian chant.

The point I wish to make is this—that this performance, for all of its shortcomings due to the lack of mechanical equipment and proper lighting, struck a note of such exquisite simplicity that it served as a challenge to all that master musicians and master directors can accomplish. It proved, once and for all, that within the living tradition of Christendom can be found the elements capable of transforming a group of average children into

artists. Whatever may be the amazing technique by which the teachers of these children accomplished the miracle, it must be a technique capable of extension all over the land. A way should be provided by which work of this sort can assert its vivifying influence in a much broader field, stimulating a renaissance of that cultural heritage which is an everlasting witness to spiritual strength.

In a production of this sort, it is not scenic design that counts. Stark simplicity—of a kind almost unknown to the professional theatre—is what gives it much of its ineffable charm. When little theatres begin to realize the fine tradition they can bring to new life in the mystery and miracle plays and in primitive plays from legend, they will be doing a far greater thing for the universality of the theatre than in trying to copy slavishly the work and methods of the professional stage.

In one respect, however, they can not neglect the technique of the professionals—and that is in employing the services of the best director they can obtain. The real importance of the director is a matter seldom understood by casual theatre-goers.

Just what does a director do? He is like the leader of an orchestra, except for the essential fact that when it comes to the performance, he must step aside and let the orchestra play without him. He must give sufficient impetus in rehearsal to last for weeks to come. How does he do this? If he is a man of intuitive type, he will probably start by soaking himself in the play. Then he will

take the cast provided, give them his general idea of the play, and allow them, for a short time, to work out their own interpretations. This gives him a chance to sense the abilities of each actor. He may find one whose diction and manner are strident, another who plays everything in an ultra-restrained key, and still others who gallop through their lines as if making a recitation. If the play is to have unity of effect, he must pick the one actor who comes nearest to his own idea of the play, and begin, by slow processes, to tune the others to the same key. This may mean long private conversations with each actor, much coaxing and coaching, much explanation of character, much tedious, tactful effort. Or frank public brutality may be needed. A director must be a master psychologist if he is to bring out the best unity from his actors without unnecessarily wounding their feelings or discouraging their ambition.

The mere routine of directing is no child's play. The director must know how to place his actors on the stage for the best effect in each scene—one grouping for pictorial effect, another for dramatic contrast, another to give the sense of swift action, another to give the illusion of complete naturalness and ease. They must not cross each other at awkward moments. At the right instant they must be standing where they can be heard and seen from all parts of the house. The lighting effects must bring out the important points in the human material he is using. The personal eccentricities of a certain star may demand the rearrangement of an entire scene. And then,

when all these matters are attended to, all experiments made and either adopted or rejected, the director must generally give the actors much of their important "business"—that is, the use of their hands or of properties, eloquent pantomime and a hundred and one minor perfections all tending to complete the illusion of the play. An orchestral leader has only tonal effect to consider. The stage director must think of voice, of visual effect, of characterization, of group movement, and all of them conditioned by the personalities, sensitiveness, physical appearance, vocal equipment and "temperament" of the particular actors with whom he is asked to work. As a last straw, when the fatal opening evening comes, he must step aside, with the knowledge that the audience will applaud the cleverness of the playwright, the genius of certain actors, and hardly notice the program line, "staged by ——" An orchestra leader takes the public's applause. The stage director, on the contrary, gives his child the glory!

A good director can do more than any number of talented individual actors to make a group theatre a success. Nothing could prove this point better than the growing influence and prestige of certain professional as well as amateur groups throughout the country. Such organizations as the Theatre Guild, the late Neighborhood Playhouse and Miss Le Gallienne's Civic Repertory Company have grown immeasurably in the power and grace of their work through continuity of a directing hand. Occasionally such groups make use of a "guest director"

for some special play—as the Neighborhood Playhouse made use of David Vardi for “The Dybbuk”—but even the guest director benefits from the ensemble training his actors have received under their director-in-chief. I am inclined to believe, in fact, that against the partly competitive inroads of the talking pictures, the real soul of the theatre, with its broad humanity and its warm personal touch, will find its home increasingly among group theatres centering around a strong and intelligent personality in the permanent director.

No change more inspiring to the creative work of both playwrights and actors could come about than a definite and marked increase in this group type of theatrical enterprise. It offers economic security to the actors, who are engaged for a whole season. It offers them creative opportunity in the variety of rôles they must play and a chance for artistic integrity in their gradual subordination to each other's abilities and to the unifying force of the director. The playwright can expect a readier reception here for simple and sincere plays, because such groups build up an audience loyalty and sympathy that will overlook the occasional failure and respond with generous enthusiasm to honest achievement.

In certain rare instances, an individual producer, who is also a director, can attain something of the same spirit. Charles Hopkins has established a distinct—and distinguished—feeling of continuity in his own small theatre in New York. Wherever possible, he uses the same players in successive plays. Arthur Hopkins, to a lesser de-

gree, has built up something of a personal tradition as the equivalent of group tradition. So, too, has Winthrop Ames. But the Civic Repertory and the Theatre Guild remain the conspicuous achievements of the decade, giving more than a rumor of the underlying change we shall probably see in all that is not blatantly mere "show business."

## CHAPTER XVI

### SCREEN AND ETHER

BROOKS ATKINSON, one of the most studious and at the same time provocative critics of the New York daily press, is on record (as also Theresa Helburn, executive director of the Theatre Guild) as to the probable course of the alleged battle between the talking pictures and the stage. Their thoughts, which have found a responsive echo in many quarters, center around the idea that the advent of talking pictures promises to be a boon to all that is best in the theatre, even though it may seriously hurt the "theatre business."

This line of argument—which by now has become a composite line emanating from many sources—runs somewhat as follows: The talkies have established a genuine popularity, in spite of obvious defects. They will undoubtedly continue to draw increasing crowds. But their line of best endeavor seems to be in plays of the more popular order—plays of action, of mystery or of swiftly moving comedy, including musical plays. Because of their technical scope they are better equipped than the stage to lend realism and variety to entertaining plots. They can show more scenes, follow action more surely and completely, take one into the outdoors, or from the



ELMER RICE

. . . found a rumor of resurrection in a Street Scene.



roof to the cellar of a house. In other words, they can take a plot which does not work very well on the conventional stage because of limitations of stage setting and scene shifting, and give it credible life. The off-stage event, which so often robs a stage play of much of its effectiveness, is almost unknown to the talkies. They form, then, a definite and almost unique medium for giving to plot its full expansion.

But the theatre has another function quite as important as plot, and that is the conveying of the finer nuances of thought and emotion, the subtler expressions of character, and that fine ecstasy which—whether we encounter it in verse or in prose—we recognize at once as poetry. It seems almost impossible, from the inherent mechanical nature of the talkies, that they will ever be able to rival the theatre in this particular function. It is a fact of history, of course, that a war play of such elementary emotional appeal as "Journey's End" can be given adequate expression in the talkies, but who can imagine a competent screen production of Chekhov's "The Sea Gull," or of O'Neill's "The Great God Brown," or any of Ibsen's plays of inner character, or of such intimately human cobwebs as the Quintero plays? The talkies may some day be excellent for conveying emotion, whenever it can be done through objective action or situation, but the play which turns on inner character rather than external action will always demand, as will the play that seeks to express fine thought cogently, the warmth and spontaneity and immediacy of the actor on the speaking stage.

Mr. Atkinson compares the future audience of the theatre with the audience for printed literature today. You will find in the theatre, he suggests, the class of people who devour Dimnet's "The Art of Thinking," or who have turned many recent biographies and books of popular philosophic discussion into best sellers. And the hope he finds in the theatre's future lies precisely in the fact that this class of people, instead of being tightly limited, is rapidly expanding to proportions that will be able to give the theatre its economic sinews. Moreover, the theatre will always have those rarer spirits who love the truly fine literature of all ages. The talkies will take care of that type of entertainment-seeker to whom the "theatre business"—meaning the purely commercial manager—has catered in the past. The talkies can do all that he has done and much more besides. The entertainment industry, in other words, is definitely passing from the stage to the screen, leaving the true art of the theatre a new freedom for development and a special audience of its own. In many cases, the same people will be found in both audiences. The poet often enjoys a good detective story. Variety stimulates all but the most thin-soiled high-brows. There will be a right wing of exclusive theatre-goers, as earnest and as stupid as most extreme right wings, a center group that will seek its entertainment and stimulus from every valid source with fine catholicity of taste and emotional judgment, and a popular left wing, approximately as stupid as the right, which will go only to the talkies, just as it now reads only cheap novels and

finds the summit of its culture in suburbiana and Rotary.

I am inclined to think that a clear-cut line between dramatic material that is essentially of the stage and another kind essentially of the screen will never be established. There will, I am sure, be plays, even of a serious character, which will achieve unexpected power under the improved technique of the talking screen. Bernard Shaw evidently looks forward to a possible day when his own talk orgies may find a place upon the improved screen. Yet there will be many simple stories—"Journey's End" is a good example of the type—which the theatre will never relinquish wholly to the screen. There will probably be this center zone in dramatic presentations just as there will be in the audiences themselves. But allowing for this does not rob the main suggestion of its interest. It is still reasonably plain that the theatre will have to be on its very best behavior if it is to hold any sizable audience at all, and that this necessity will bring a much higher level of theatrical experiment than the last few years have witnessed among commercial showmen. The competition of the talkies will most certainly be a boon to lovers of fine theatre, and in a sense which the silent screen could never achieve because, as a medium, it remained measurably distinct and apart from the stage.

Both the talkies and the old silent screen obviously share certain qualities which will always make both of them describable only in terms vastly different from those of the stage. Let me submit at least one unfor-

gettable picture in support of this view. "The Silent Enemy" is certainly a re-creation of history impossible to the stage.

This story is acted entirely by native Indians. Its theme is the fight of the tribes against the threat of hunger and famine—its setting the deep forests of eastern Canada and the barren lands just west of Hudson Bay. The producers have made it a special point to include no trick photography. What you see before you actually took place—whether it be the fight of a mountain lion and a bear, or timber wolves attacking a bull moose, the passing of a great caribou herd, or the trekking northward of the tribe in biting blizzards and temperature thirty-five degrees below zero.

"The Silent Enemy" does not stand alone among examples of the genius peculiar to the screen. "Chang" was another nature epic of almost equal power, and more recently "Trader Horn" and "The Viking" have caught the vibrant reality which can be found only outside of theatre walls. A more definite type of historical romance, especially when set against a broad horizon, as "All Quiet on the Western Front," also achieves a panoramic scope and a visual integrity far beyond the limitations of the stage. And then—there is always Chaplin! No stage could have encompassed his antics. He needed just what the screen offered, and made it his own. The very nature of his art demanded a freedom from all limitations of scenes and acts and curtains.

For Chaplin's sense of the incongruous (which the

great stage clowns have always shared) is only the beginning of his art. Even the majority of his clowning antics are not original, coming down, as they do, through the ages, from the day when the first clown banged a bladder on the head of a stolid victim. There is something else which gives Chaplin his supremacy, and although it has been said, I am sure, very often, I shall try to repeat it now, for what it has to do with the contribution of the screen.

Chaplin's particular genius has two phases, the first of which lies in his intention and the second in his power to convey that intention. Remember that I am not speaking about conscious intention. The real artist, as we know, is seldom fully conscious of the entire import of his creative effort. When Eugene O'Neill tries to explain one of his plays, or when Chaplin tries to explain the meaning of his famous costume, including the significance of his large shoes, you can be pretty sure that they are missing the whole point. The artistic impulse, in general, is the very reverse of self-consciousness. It consists in reaching after things which are not quite clear, or which are admittedly to be grasped only through intuition. The moment art becomes self-conscious and capable of clear analysis by the artist, it changes from art to artifice. Chaplin's conscious intention may be anything from the effort to amuse to some notion that the figure he has created represents all the poor, defeated and pathetic characters of the world rolled into one. But I have a very strong conviction that beneath any of these

possible intentions there surges nothing less than the impulse to create a new hero legend. It is in the heroic mould, rather than in the pathetic, that I am inclined to look for the secret of Chaplin's extraordinary power over audiences—in something, that is, which is akin to the basic folk-lore which still runs strong in the imaginations and hearts of people, no matter how civilized and sophisticated they may think themselves.

After all, the essence of the hero legend is the posing of an apparently insoluble conflict. If it is really insoluble, it turns into tragedy, after the Greek fashion. If persistency against all odds can solve it, then it turns either into heroic drama or into comedy. But whether we are thinking about Jack the Giant Killer or about Orestes, the chief center of our interest is the pitting of apparent weaknesses against enormous strength or power. Sometimes the hero legend ends in physical defeat and moral victory—as in "Hamlet"—in which case it becomes, of course, lyric. But always there is the struggle against more than ordinary odds. And this is just the kind of situation Chaplin has evolved in all his pictures since he ceased being only a clown. His physical insignificance, his poverty, and his spells of stupidity, though turned to comic effect, are really a statement of the old hero problem, the modern equivalent of David and his sling shot matched against the giant of organized society, of wealth and of the cruelty of indifference.

Can we imagine any one of these Chaplin hero stories condensed and cramped within stage conventions? They

are wholly dependent upon their rapid pace, their preposterous continuity, their incessant shifting of incident and interest. No. The screen at its best is a medium apart from the stage. It is not a competitor, except, perhaps, in that border zone where the theatre dwindles to "show business" and the screen surrenders its unique birth-right to what we might call the "way of all flash."

And what, then, of the radio? One of the most persistent of all new forms of radio amusement, namely, the effort to give radio plays, is certainly an integral part of the great world of make-believe. But, like every new form of make-believe, it hardly seems that radio plays have reached their best development. Poetry and fiction are old arts and have a secure place, with established rules and standards. The same is true of the spoken drama on the stage, and it is beginning to be true of the better grade of motion pictures. But, unless I am very much mistaken, the effort to give plays by radio has started in considerable confusion and we have not yet learned to realize that it is a special and distinct form of make-believe which must, like the screen, and of necessity, have its own ideas and its own rules.

It has been said, not very seriously, that we are in danger of being divided into two classes of people: those who listen without seeing, and those who see without hearing. This means, of course, that up to the advent of the speaking motion picture, many millions were content to watch a silent drama on the screen, and other millions were content to listen to voices or instruments over the radio

without seeing the performers. It may be that in a few years the perfecting of television will solve the entire difficulty of radio and enable us to watch as well as to hear plays in our own homes. But for the present, it is true that our eyes are much better trained than our ears, and that for every ten persons who can lose themselves in a world of make-believe before the motion picture screen, there are probably only three who can listen to spoken words over the radio and imagine what the action of the play must be like.

Most of us have had the experience of sitting beside the radio and tuning in on a shortened version of some Broadway play. Instead of the voices of the actors giving us a vivid sense of taking part in the drama, we seem to be hearing a series of disconnected wails and shouts and groans. Even with the occasional assistance of the announcer, we soon find it a real mental effort to try to follow what is happening. What is the reason for this? First of all, it is because broadcasters, when they first thought of presenting plays, took the easiest road. They said in effect: "Here we have hundreds of plays ready-made with interesting dialogue and dramatic situations. Surely those who have been unable to see the plays will be glad to listen to them and to recognize the voices of their favorite actors and actresses." But in saying or thinking this, the broadcasters forgot that we are all slaves of convention. We can listen to one person reading a novel aloud and enjoy it hugely. But it would probably

be very confusing to us if four or five people were to read a novel, a different person reading the lines of each separate character. For this reason, listening to an ordinary radio play goes against all our normal habits and instincts.

The truth is that the broadcasters did not realize that they were dealing in an entirely different medium of art, and that the radio would have to develop a technique of its own, just as distinct as the technique of the motion picture or the novel. They have begun to realize this recently, and in some of the so-called biblical plays being given over the large stations, we are at last seeing the elements of the new art appear. Just as the movies discovered in time that they could jump around quickly from one scene to another and take us all over the world in the space of a few minutes, so the students of radio are discovering that the radio play does not have to be confined, like the play on the speaking stage, to a limited number of scenes and to long dramatic sequences. In some of these biblical plays, which are written directly for the radio, the dialogue is often between two people only at any one time. The individual scenes are often quite short, and the announcer fills in the gaps very much after the fashion employed by a first-class storyteller.

What is actually happening is this: The radio is gradually bringing the form of the radio play nearer to that of a dramatic reading, and away from the forms of the

spoken stage. The confusion of many voices speaking during one scene is being eliminated. Music is being used to create a definite mood, and the proportion of dialogue to the story, as told by the announcer, is becoming less and less. I have a strong feeling, therefore, that the future radio play will become more and more of a dramatic narrative, told by an expert announcer, with the help of music, and interspersed only here and there with dialogue, and then only when the dialogue itself conveys the meaning of the story better than the straight recitation by the announcer himself. It will be, in fact, something of a return to the old mediaeval fashion in which professional story-tellers traversed the lands of Europe and entertained the guests in the castle with tales of adventure and great renown. The method of these story-tellers was simple. They would, like the announcer of the radio today, give you the essential setting of the story and then at a given point break in with snatches of dialogue, but without much attempt at acting.

This form of entertainment, while totally different from the spoken play or the motion picture, has every chance of becoming as real an art as that of the old ballad singers. The time will come, I am sure, and perhaps soon, when skilled authors will be asked to write dramatic readings direct for the radio, just as many authors today are writing stories direct for the motion picture. If the story of some Broadway play is sufficiently

exciting to make good radio material, you will find that instead of merely condensing the play and allowing the actors to speak their regular dialogue, either the author or a skilled adapter will be asked to write out the substance of the play as a running story, using dialogue only when absolutely necessary and creating effects of mood and atmosphere by the skilled reading of the announcer himself, or by the use of music. A technique of this sort will create a definite feeling of make-believe quite as strong in its way as the conventions of the theatre or of the screen.

Instead of being discouraged with many of the awkward efforts being made today, we might look with some interest and enthusiasm for the improvements being made along the lines I have just suggested. In a world filled with all too many harsh realities, which we must face and conquer, the creating of a world of make-believe can serve a very useful and energizing purpose. Like the blessing of sleep itself, it can refresh and recharge our minds so that we can go back to the tasks of reality stronger and with more courage. If you want an interesting proof of this, you might recall the fact that in this supposedly most practical of all countries we are developing the greatest reading public in the history of mankind, and that means a public which finds a creative and inspiring value in make-believe. It is of no small importance, then, to realize that we are facing the return of a long-lost art—the art of the story-teller. There is actu-

ally something quite mediaeval and fine in the thought that within a few years we may be able, within the sanctuary of our own homes, to listen to splendid and brave stories well told, and through this new medium of art, to rediscover the magic of an older day.

## CHAPTER XVII

### SHIPS IN THE HARBOR

AT the outset of this book I said that even passing ships sometimes return—that one sees them again and again in a port of call—and that some plays are like those familiar ships. At all events, the plays and productions I have tried to recall from the vivid and more or less immediate past hold; for me, at least, this recurrent quality. Most of them, I am sure, are still being given in repertory or by little theatre groups or by road companies. A few, whose first lives were unhappily short, are apt to be re-discovered and to achieve new importance in a less hurried and less brutal perspective. But what is still more important is this—that the themes of these plays will recur incessantly, with new plots, perhaps, and under new authorship, but with an almost eternal insistence; and our enjoyment of the old plays revived or of the new plays with the old themes can and should be enriched by all the sympathy and understanding we can draw from the efforts of these last few years.

They have been years quivering with change, with impatience, with unrealized hopes, and with occasional superb attainment—important years, like the Elizabethan years, or like the thirteenth century awakenings, or like

the period of revolutionary France and the founding of new-world traditions of free government. This time, however, they have also been years of world-wide movement—starting with the first world war of known time and driving through to the stupendous upheavals now echoing from China across the western hemisphere and Europe to Moscow. Ideas, unlike germs, can not be politely quarantined—far less with radio than ever before. The air itself is surcharged with the things that turn poets into prophets. If our theatre of the poets has been changing, the root of the change is in the battle of ideas whose clash and clang fills the ether itself. Decidedly, what has been born in these years will live, and with terrible vitality, for long days to come.

Probably it is the stirring consciousness of this greater world war, this Armageddon of ideas, that prompts all the well meant and futile efforts to censor the modern stage. We recognize the theatre as one of the giant weapons in the battle. But we do not understand the nature of the weapon. We do not see that the blatant immorality of one play, or even of a hundred plays, is often an immorality of idea, of theme, even more than of plot and scene. And because we do not see this, we do not see that legal censorship is impossible until the battle of ideas has been fought to a finish.

To put it baldly—how can we have censorship when we can not possibly agree on what should be censored? Suppose we get back, for a last time, to fundamentals. The theme of a play is a question and an answer—a

problem and an idea about the solution of that problem. The material used in a play springs from the theme. So does the plot. Everything leads back to Idea. But it is precisely about the right answers to problems—about ideas—that the whole world is atrociously at war, not only between nations, but between every group within a nation right down to the family dinner table. You and I, as individuals, may have the most profound and ardent convictions as to right and wrong. Even a great world group, such as the Catholic Church, may have unmistakably clear principles on marriage and family life, on rules of business conduct and social ethics, on wages, labor and property. But those principles are violently and even savagely attacked. The Catholic Church happens to agree with the principle of the American Constitution (also of Magna Carta) that minorities have “unalienable rights,” that some things, in their very nature, are beyond the authority of law-makers to change. But neither Communists nor Fascists (both apostles of the “absolute state”) accept this idea. Neither do millions of American citizens, who consider the only “unalienable” thing in the world to be the power of a majority to enforce its will.

What representative board of censors, then, could ever agree upon the idea or theme of a play that attacked prohibition—or that attacked property rights—or that encouraged easy divorce and remarriage—or that encouraged no marriage at all?

I am not one half as much concerned with any dan-

gers to "free speech" in censorship as with the utter impossibility of agreement under present world conditions upon any code of ideas touching any remotely basic principle of life. Murder of inconvenient weaklings has been advocated on our stage quite as definitely as free love. Some people are obsessed with sex ideas, chiefly because sex disturbances are about the most universal of the race experiences. But lust happens to be only one of what a simpler and sounder generation called the seven deadly sins. Pride, covetousness, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth (with murder, theft and drunkenness all aptly implied) are vigorous companions to lust. And there is not one of them without its advocates—and in "respectable" circles at that. Possibly the advocates of shop-lifting are limited and not very vocal—but there are certainly ways of stealing another man's property, which the business man, for example, calls communism, and which the communist calls capitalism, but which actually have nothing whatever to do with any "system" and have entirely to do with the legalized abuses of every system since the world started. Censorship of sex matters in plays is the kind most people have in mind—but that is simply evading every other thing which the world battle of ideas implies.

Even if censorship were limited to sex, however, we should be no nearer to meeting the difficulty. Take a concrete case. A play, by implication, proposes divorce and remarriage as the only sensible solution of a given marriage tangle. In Nevada, that would accord completely

with the view of the majority as expressed in the State laws. In New York—unless statutory grounds were involved—it would be “legally” an immoral play. In a State permitting no divorce, it would be “legally” immoral no matter what the circumstances. If we assume statutory grounds, then no New York State committee of censors could possibly order the play from the boards. It would be “approved”—whitewashed—even though, to millions of New York citizens who do not believe in divorce, it would remain an immoral play. We could multiply such examples endlessly, and all to establish two points; first, that general public agreement on moral standards must precede any legal censorship that is not a farce; and, second, that the danger of whitewashing a really insidious play (because the play jury disagrees) is almost as positive an evil as allowing it to run on unadvertised without other censorship than common sense public opinion.

Possibly common sense comes nearer to agreement in condemning plain obscenity than in discussing any other aspect of modern plays. But obscene speeches or scenes are matters of play material far more than matters of idea. Moreover, they are fully dealt with in the penal codes of most States. I feel I am not violating common sense, nor what every psychologist understands clearly, by suggesting that rank and obvious obscenity should never be granted immunity from criminal proceedings. What remnant we have of common standards is embodied in the criminal law, and before the sentimental-

ists abolish that, too, we should enforce it as impartially in the theatre as in the dance halls and dives that have inherited the business of the "tenderloin."

In the meantime, the larger battle of ideas will be, and is being, fought on every front—in the printed page, by radio, and in every community and home throughout the world, and, as always, in the theatre, the market place of the poets. That is why the important plays of the last few years, whether they are still being given or not, hold the curious fascination of anything that embodies an approaching crisis.

Are we nearing mental and spiritual exhaustion? Look at the leap and fervor of the great lyric tragedies to find one answer. Even in the tragedies without song, there is less of exhaustion than of sheer bewilderment or of embattled pain—as from a chained Prometheus. Whatever else may be happening to the American mind, it is losing neither vigor nor aspiration. It may be at war with itself intellectually. Its judgment may be warped by humid winds. But its emotional surge will not rest content for long in any entangled chains.

Are we losing our deep laughter? If you scan the comedies, perhaps you will have to admit that we now smile more than we laugh. The robust spirit of the tavern is hard to find today. Men can laugh deeply only when they are filled with the wine of great certainties. And certainty has slipped from too many of the moderns—even though courage remains. Some of the mental bewilderment reflected in our tragedies has slipped over

into the spirit of our comedies, and since there is no such thing in the world as a bewildered deep laughter, we must, for the moment, be content to smile.

Our hope—curiously enough, for a people said to be “practical”—rests in our enduring power to dream. When all else fails, it is often dreams that bring the intuition of renewed certainties. The fantasies which American audiences have cherished, and the tender nonsense of the poets—these are what give the true measure of the American mind in the making, of its eager simplicity hiding beneath an ugly sophistication, of its generous understanding, of its delight in weaving the possible out of the seemingly impossible.

Better still—and of course—if you want to experience the inwardness of our life, look at the whole astonishing pageant and fact of the American theatre itself. Drink it in. Let yourself be wholly ensnared by its illusion. In that very act—and better than by all manner of cold reasoning—you yourself are becoming part of the American mind. You, too, are dreaming, accepting the unreal for the real, living lives that have never been born—except in a prophetic dream!

You and the turbulent, mocking, gallant spirit of the whole world around you become one in the theatre. Dream! Illusion! Yet—you know, as I know, that the innermost spirit of the dream changes perceptibly as you and I change, as we lose or glimpse again the certainties we are pursuing, as our hidden romance nears its goal. Then perhaps this theatre is more than mere dream and

illusion after all. Perhaps it really holds, and not too deeply concealed, something of the truth of tomorrow—something gleaming over the crest of those mountains we call “today.”

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